I SAVED TOO MANY GIRLS AND CAUSED THE LITTLE APOCALYPSE
4
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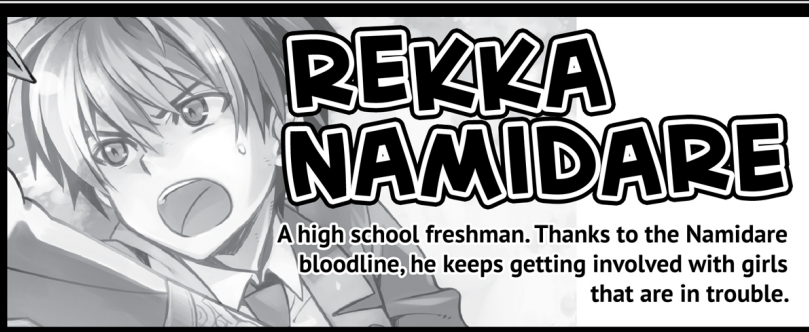
"I-If you're going to the amusement park, go with me!"
"I asked Rekka first. Butt out."
I was on the verge of getting an ulcer...

HOMUNCULUS
SILVER SLAYER
WANDERING TREASURE HUNTER
CHELSEA MARGARET
"I hate you... Namidare..."
"I'll make my own miracle."
My highest priority task... is the annihilation of Rosalind C. Bathory.
MYSTERIOUS GIRL
ROSALIND C. BATHORY

"THE PRICE... IS A HUMAN LIFE."
I gulped.



REKKA NAMIDARE

A high school freshman. Thanks to the Namidare bloodline, he keeps getting involved with girls that are in trouble.

SATSUKI OTOMO

A high school freshman. She is the girl-next-door childhood friend, and heir to the Omniscient Magic.

IRIS FINERITAS CYPHERCALL

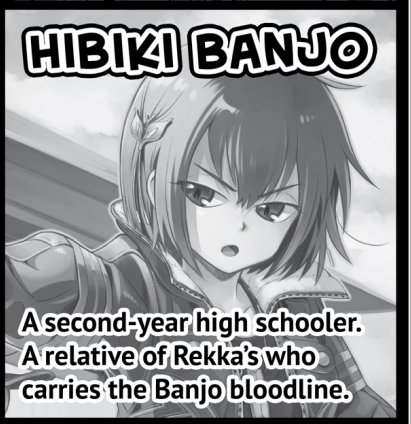
A high school freshman.
A space princess who's presently studying to be a bride on Earth.

HARISSA HOPE

A sorcerer from another world. She can't go back home anymore, so she's now living at Rekka's house.

ABOUT CHARACTERS

About Characters



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Prologue 0-1: Chelsea Margaret

For Chelsea Margaret, setting foot on the soil of a foreign land inspired no special feelings. She and her little brother had run away from home when they were little, and ever since then, they'd traveled from one strange country to the next like migratory birds. East, then west. North, then south. If you were to draw out the entire distance she'd traveled in a straight line, it would probably be long enough to circle the globe five times.

This was her third time in Japan. But this time, she wasn't here for business or sightseeing. She was here to see a world-renowned specialist about a surgical treatment for her sick brother. But...

"What do you mean, he's not going to get better?!"

When the doctor delivered the news to her in the dimly lit examination room, she got so mad that she grabbed him by the collar and lifted him up.

"C-Calm down."

The elderly doctor must've expected this kind of response because he just kept moaning "calm down" again and again in pain.

"...Tch." Once her initial explosion of emotion subsided, Chelsea pushed him away. "Wh-What are you saying...? My brother's not going to get better? Is it the money? What? Do you think I can't pay? I may not look it, but I'm—"

Maybe the doctor didn't think she could afford the hefty bill for the procedure... Or maybe that's just what she was telling herself. She leaned forward like she was about to grab him again.

"That's not the problem," the doctor explained in as calm a voice as he could muster.

Her brother's disease was too advanced. At this late of a stage, the surgery would be in vain. And...

"I think, at most, he's got another three months..."

He said the last thing Chelsea wanted to hear.

"...!"

There were no words to express the feelings that welled up inside of her now. She realized there was no point in listening to

any more, so she stood up and turned to go.

"...Miss Margaret?"

"..."

Just before she left the room, Chelsea uttered a few last words.

Not a few seconds after she walked out of the door to the exam room, there was a commotion from inside. It was the doctor, whose height had shrunk to that of a child. He was screaming.

Chelsea didn't even look back.

I have to do something...

She couldn't count on doctors anymore. But she couldn't go back to her family, either. Even if the Margaret clan was famous for the skill of its mages, she'd long since cut all ties with it. Besides, magic might be able to heal wounds, but it couldn't cure illnesses. Only saints and Christ could do that.

I have to do something... Anything...

Practical measures like medicine weren't working. Even more fantastic measures, like magic, wouldn't work. The only thing left... was a miracle.

There was one option she'd looked into, just in case everything else failed. If it was really true, she might be able to save her brother. But the odds of that were close to zero.

Could she really make a miracle happen in just three months?

I have to try. I'll make my own miracle.

And then Chelsea, who had hardly been paying attention to where she was going, slammed straight into a young girl.

"Kyah!"

Chelsea was the one who'd been moving faster, and her momentum sent her tumbling to the ground.

"I'm sorry. Are you all right?"

The person she'd hit had only been knocked back a single step, and they offered Chelsea a hand up. The girl was just a black silhouette against the setting sun, but Chelsea could see that the hand she held out was wearing a fingerless glove.

Prologue 0-2: Rosalind C. Bathory

Somewhere out at sea, a girl in a white dress was standing aboard a pirate ship.

"...Hmph."

The girl—Rosalind C. Bathory—sighed as if she was bored. She was surrounded by men lying on the deck. They were the pirates who owned this ship.

These pirates were ruffians who made their living by plundering, kidnapping, and sometimes looting valuables from sunken ships. But right now, every one of them was lying unconscious on the deck.

It was almost as if they'd fallen at the frail, tiny hands of this little girl. It seemed impossible, but given that the girl was unhurt and every last pirate was out cold, there was hardly any other conclusion that could be drawn from this scene.

"..."

Rosalind raised her right hand. She curled each finger in turn, slowly forming a fist... and then sadly let it go. She drew her hand back to her chest.

There was a tear there in her dress like a blade had cut through it, complete with the smear of a bloodstain around it. But the blade that must have pierced her chest had left no scar behind, and the bloody stains on the white fabric were faded, indicating that a long time had passed since they were made.

"...Re..."

Rubbing the bloodstains, Rosalind's mouth moved just a little... before breaking into a bitter sigh.

"Even this small bond is to be taken from me?"

Heh...

She tried to laugh, but her voice stuck in the back of her throat and disappeared.

"...!"

Then her eyes shot wide open as if she'd just realized something. She patted down her clothes before dropping to the deck

on all fours, kicking and pushing the unconscious men out of her way as she crawled around.

“It’s not... It’s not here!”

The air of boredom about her just moments ago was gone now as she searched frantically.

After she’d spent some time scouring the deck, she suddenly raised her head as a new possibility occurred to her. She ran across the ship, again knocking the unconscious men aside as she made her way to a rectangular box.

The soaking wet box was covered with algae and barnacles. It looked like something the pirates had brought up from the bottom of the sea. Although the cover had been removed, she could see that the inside of the box was completely dry. It must have been sealed very carefully.

The girl stuck her head inside the box and ran her hands from one corner to the other, checking every inch of it. Her eyes lit up when her tiny hands touched something small.

“!”

She took what looked like a single piece of paper out of the box and sighed with relief. It was an old photograph, torn in the middle just like her dress. The damage made it impossible to see the face of the boy standing next to her in the picture.

“...”

She was disappointed, but still she held the photo close to her chest as if it was very dear to her. As if it was the most important thing she’d ever owned.

“I hate you... Namidare...”

Drops of clear liquid began to fall from Rosalind’s red eyes.

Prologue 0-3: Silver Slayer

A homunculus is a servant of its master.

Homunculi are one of the greatest secrets of alchemy: artificial life-forms that are capable of independent thought, but exist only to obey their masters.

Homunculi have no other purpose.

This homunculus in particular, Silver Slayer, was watching a line of ants traveling along the side of a dirt road when suddenly she raised her head.

“Confirmed revival of lost target signal,” she whispered mechanically and froze for a moment. She looked like she was thinking deeply, or perhaps wasn’t thinking at all.

She appeared to be extremely beautiful from what little you could see of her underneath her bulky jacket. Her hair was closer to the color of ash than silver. Her eyes were the same hue. Her whole body was wrapped tightly in dirty bandages, but the gaps in them revealed her alabaster skin. She seemed almost too beautiful to be a living creature, and her expressionless face only made her look more like a doll.

“Delayed order will now be executed in accordance with signal’s restoration.”

She then closed her eyes, as if listening for something.

...Creeeak.

There was a squeaking sound like groaning gears. It was coming from inside her.

“Confirmed extension of unit lifespan beyond planned parameters. No hindrance to objectives.”

As she stood up, Silver Slayer coldly analyzed the fact that her end was near.

“Attempting to communicate with master before resuming activities...”

Silver Slayer closed her eyes for a moment.

“Failure. Trying again... Failure.”

But no matter how many times she tried, she just kept repeating

the same word. Failure.

"...Deleting check-in task. Selecting next action from queue..." Her flat voice droned on as she stood perfectly still. "...Highest priority directive selected from queue. Highest priority directive is the execution of master's will."

Her master's orders were more important than anything else. That was the one absolute in her life. It was written into her upon creation. Her master's will was her moral compass.

She started to walk down the road, ready to execute her orders... but suddenly stopped. It was because of the line of ants that she'd been staring at earlier. The ants were clever and intelligent. They were carrying food back to their nest.

"Why did I stop? My actions are incorrect."

An error had occurred in her priority list.

It wasn't of much consequence when her target had vanished, but now it was time to fulfill her master's orders. And with the limits of her lifespan approaching, she didn't have a second to waste.

Yet she'd stopped anyway. For some reason, she wanted to watch the ants as they were hard at work once more. It was almost as if there was a bug in her thinking task. This wasn't an action chosen as the result of a logical process. It was more like a new priority had just popped out of the void and overwritten her previous one.

"..."

Silver Slayer raised her foot to stomp the ants below her. She didn't know what was going on, but if these insects were interfering with the execution of her primary task, they needed to be eliminated.

...Creeeak.

Another creaking noise came from within her. But this wasn't the scream of some old, rusty part. It seemed to be something else entirely.

"..."

After a moment, she lowered her foot. Not on top of the ants, but on the road she'd meant to travel. She began walking again.

"Repeating highest priority task: My master has ordered the annihilation of Rosalind C. Bathory," she whispered as if to remind herself of her duty.

Prologue 1

Wednesday. The middle of the week. The bomb was dropped during morning homeroom...

"Rekka, take me to an amusement park this Sunday."

"Huh?!"

One sentence from Iris's mouth was all it took to completely wake me up from my drowsiness.

"You will, right? Right?"

"Umm..."

I averted my gaze from Iris, who had slammed both of her hands down on my desk and was leaning over it... If I hadn't looked away, her two large breasts—looking even larger squeezed between her arms—would have distracted me too much to even speak.

"Why?" I asked, feeling my cheeks turn red.

"Well, I was watching TV yesterday, and they said on a commercial that some huge entertainment facility called an 'amusement park' is opening soon! It looked like a ton of fun! So I want to go with you!"

Iris brought her smiling face (and her breasts) closer to me.

"O-Oh, I see..."

I turned away from the approaching mountains of temptation and tried to think.

I'd seen that commercial too. The place was just a few stops down on the train line, and it was opening this weekend. So Iris saw it and thought it looked fun, huh?

Well, it was true that amusement parks could be fun places, but it was only half as much fun if you went alone. It would be a shame if Iris had to go by herself. I didn't want Earth to disappoint her.

"Well, I don't have any plans, so if you want..."

But before I could finish my sentence...

"Rekka!"

My childhood friend Satsuki Otomo, who was sitting in the seat next to mine, slammed her fists down on her desk and shouted my name.

“Wh-What? Wait, why are you glaring at me?”

“I am not glaring at you!” she yelled back, but she was still glaring daggers.

Wh-What? Had I done something wrong?

As I sat there, confused by my childhood friend’s anger, she took two slips of paper out from her desk.

“I-If you’re going to the amusement park, go with me!” she said, her voice cracking a little.

Not knowing what to do, I looked down some, but my eyes gravitated towards what she was holding. It looked like a pair of tickets to the amusement park Iris and I had just been talking about. In the corner of one of them, I could see the words “Grand Opening Preorder Ticket.” That made me wonder...

“Where did you get those things?”

And why are you bringing them out now? I asked, but not out loud. I was too scared.

“Well... um... now that I’ve got all these new rivals, I felt like I needed to try harder...” Satsuki’s voice trailed off like she was making an excuse. I wasn’t sure what for, though.

Anyway, now that Satsuki had interrupted, a certain someone was extremely upset.

“I asked Rekka first. Butt out.”

“But I was the first one to invite him! Do you know how long it took me to figure out where to go, or what it took to work up the courage to ask him?”

“Not my problem! First come, first serve!”

Sparks were flying between Iris and Satsuki, and I was caught in the middle. Yup. I thought that it might go down like this.

I sighed a bit... but suddenly Iris grabbed my head and pulled it to her chest, giving me an indescribably happy feeling directly on my face!

“Rekka, you want to go with me, right?”

“Mmfff!”

I couldn’t breathe, much less answer. There really are breasts that can smother people!

“Stop it! Rekka can’t breathe!” Satsuki’s voice was almost a scream as she ripped me away from Iris.

No, no... I wasn’t a little disappointed. Definitely not. That could’ve been fatal, after all. So I really wished the other boys in the classroom would stop gnashing their teeth. And stop scowling at

me like that. Well, I guess if I were in their shoes, I might've done the same thing.

Anyway, putting that aside... I had more important matters to deal with.

"Rekka, you're going with me, right?" asked Iris.

"You're going with me, aren't you?" asked Satsuki.

What was I supposed to do?

"Oh my. Isn't this getting interesting?" R had been watching the whole thing, of course.

I was on the verge of getting an ulcer, and she looked like she was having a grand old time.

"So, what will you do, Rekka?" R asked mischievously. There was no expression on her face, but I could tell she thought this was hilarious.

But it was true that I had to do something...

I suddenly came up with a brilliant plan.

"You know..."

I grabbed one of the tickets in Satsuki's hand...

"Couldn't you do this instead?"

And handed it to Iris.

"..."

"..."

...Why were both of them looking at me with such cold eyes? The tension that had filled the air vanished in an instant and was replaced with a sense of disappointment.

What was going on here? Iris wanted to go to the amusement park. Satsuki had two tickets. It only made sense for the two of them to go together.

"And how, exactly, did you arrive at that conclusion after everything you just heard? Rekka, is your head as hollow as a balloon?" R asked, seemingly serious.

▽

After that, I somehow managed to get them to agree to both go with me as a group of three. Of course, I would buy my own ticket on the day we went. It was pricey, but... it was well worth it to get out of that mess.

"I'll have to ask Harissa only to buy the cheapest groceries for the next week..."

I sighed as my thoughts turned to the young wizard in charge of housekeeping at my place. Come to think of it, both Iris and Harissa were adapting to life here really well, weren't they? Harissa wasn't even from Earth, but when I left the house this morning, she was telling me how meat was cheaper at the supermarket if you bought it in the evening. At this point, she was basically a Japanese housewife.

It did feel like I was relying on her a little too much, but for some reason, I just couldn't stop. I figured I should come up with some way to thank her. But as I tried to think of various things that Harissa might enjoy, lunchtime rolled around.

"Rekka, are you going to eat in the classroom today?" Satsuki asked.

"Hmm, yeah, I guess."

"I'm going to get something from the cafeteria! Don't start eating without me!"

Iris bolted out of the room the moment class ended. Satsuki and I pushed our desks together. I took a boxed lunch wrapped in a cloth napkin out from my bag. It was Harissa's turn to make lunch today, if I remembered right.

"..."

Satsuki was staring as hard as she could at my lunch, but I decided not to say anything. Satsuki and Harissa were taking turns making my lunch, and it felt like they had some kind of weird rivalry going on over it. Maybe they were competing to see who could make the better lunch or something. But both of them were good, so I didn't care.

"I'm back!"

"You're always so fast at that, Iris."

"Really? I'm not even using close to my full speed, you know."

She'd been gone less than a minute. Although, aliens were a lot stronger and faster than humans, so maybe it really didn't seem that quick to her.

"Anyway, let's eat," I said.

Iris dragged a desk over to join us, and I was just about to put my hands together and dig in when the phone in my pocket began to vibrate.

"Oh, sorry. Somebody's calling."

I looked at the name on the screen: "Hibiki Banjo." I hadn't seen her since we'd gone to the hospital together... What was going

on?

"I'll be right back. You guys get started without me."

"Huh? But I want eat with you!" Iris whined.

"I can wait for a little while," Satsuki boasted.

Hmm... I really didn't mean to make them wait for me.

"I'll be back as soon as I can, okay?"

I got up and went out into the hallway before I pressed the answer button.

"You're too slow!" Hibiki shouted through the phone.

"I was just about to eat. Give me a break."

"I see... I get nervous when I have to wait a long time, so next time, pick up faster."

"Why would you get nervous over a phone call?" I asked what I thought was a simple question.

"I-It doesn't matter to you, does it?!"

"?"

Why was her voice trembling? Oh, wait, Hibiki was always a little timid around men, wasn't she? That would include me, I guess, so that would explain why she was nervous.

"Anyway, I'll pick up faster next time."

"Yeah, do that. Sheesh."

She seemed a little angry. I just sighed a bit.

We both had our own special "bloodlines." I thought that had brought us together a little, but it seemed like she didn't even feel comfortable calling me on the phone. That was kind of depressing.

"So why'd you call? You need something?"

"Of course. There's something I'd like to talk to you about..."

"To me?"

Did that mean...

"Are you caught up in another story?"

"That's right. But it seems like you and your friends could handle this one a lot better than I could on my own."

"That's fine. But what kind of story is it?"

"Basically, it's a treasure hunt."

"A treasure hunt? Like for Ieyasu Tokugawa's buried gold or something?"

"Nope. Aladdin's magic lamp."

"Aladdin?"

Wait, is that the one with the genie who grants wishes?

"You get to go look for a 'Demon's Pot' that will grant any

wish."

"Another fantasy story, huh?"

"Better than another trip to another world, right?"

"Maybe." I laughed a little.

"By the way, when you said 'you and your friends,' who else were you talking about?"

"You've got that girl who can use the Magic of Omniscience, right? Satsuki?"

"Yeah."

"If she can look up anything, then finding treasure should be easy."

"But even if we do find the treasure, is whoever you're helping going to believe us?"

Magic was a handy tool, but it was something that normal people didn't even know was real. I wasn't sure if the person who'd gotten Hibiki caught up in their treasure hunt would be willing to believe it.

"Yeah. You don't have to worry about that. Chelsea can use a little magic too."

"I see. Then maybe—Wait a second!"

"What?"

"Did you tell this Chelsea person about the Magic of Omniscience?!"

Satsuki's family had long feared that the Magic of Omniscience might be used for evil by outsiders, so they'd done everything they could to hide its existence. It was one thing to tell someone she could trust, or someone who didn't believe in magic, but it would be bad news if another mage from Earth found out about Satsuki's secret.

"Don't worry. I just told her that I knew a mage who was good at finding things. And her family might be mages, but she's a runaway turned treasure hunter."

"I... I see."

I guess that made it okay. But I'd have to be careful if she ever ran into Satsuki.

"Anyway, I think I've got the basic idea. You want to meet in person and talk about the rest?"

"If possible. It's probably better for Chelsea to tell you her story herself."

"All right. So when do we meet?"

“Real treasure hunting isn’t like in the fairy tales. If you’re going mountain climbing or spelunking, you need to get ready for it. Chelsea’s the expert, so I’m having her do that part, but it’s going to take four days or so for preparations. So we’ll meet this Sunday…”

“This Sunday?!”

I almost dropped my phone in shock.

“Huh? Yeah. So I want to meet at…”

Hibiki kept talking. But wait a minute…

“I’m going to be at an amusement park on Sunday.”

I was about to tell her that I was going with Satsuki and Iris, but…

“A-An amusement park? Y-You idiot! W-We’re not meeting up to have fun!”

“I know that! That’s not what I meant. I…”

“Th-Then don’t say something so stupid! A-Anyway, I’ve never even been to an amusement park, or even seen one, so I don’t know what I’d do there…”

“U-Um… Hibiki?”

It sounded like she was freaking out, so I tried talking to her. But she didn’t seem to hear me.

“And meeting at an amusement park on Sunday… That sounds almost like a d-d-d-date! If I went there with you… I mean, no, Chelsea would be there too, I guess… Not that she’d be in the way! Or that I wanted to be alone with you or anything! I’m just saying that… um… uh…”

“Hey, Hibiki!”

Since I didn’t seem to be getting anywhere, I tried yelling her name a little louder. I could hear her inhale sharply in surprise.

“I guess you misunderstood me. But actually…”

“I… I didn’t misunderstand you! Not at all! We can go to the amusement park after this story is solved… um… just the two of us… Oh jeez! I’m just going to bring her to you on Sunday! Come meet me at the station! Got it?”

BEEP.

She hung up on me.

“Huh? Uh, Hibiki? Hey! Hello?”

I quickly tried calling her back, but she must’ve turned off her phone.

“Fine, I’ll just send her a message… Wait.”

I didn't actually have her messenger address.

"Uh-oh..."

Now I had a scheduling conflict on top of everything else. What was I supposed to do?

"This is getting interesting, huh? Heh heh..."

"It is not interesting at all! And don't laugh!"

Without thinking, I yelled at R, who had her cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk as she floated in mid-air. The other students, who couldn't see her, were all staring at me.

I could hear them saying things like, "Namidare stares at things that aren't there, huh?" or "Namidare scares me 'cause he just starts yelling sometimes," or "Not only does Namidare have a bunch of real girls, I think he's also got an invisible girl that only he can see." That last one, unfortunately, was the most accurate.

▽

That night...

I was sitting on my living room sofa, absentmindedly watching TV.

"Hmm... What's on sale tomorrow?"

Harissa was sitting next to me, carefully studying each flyer in the newspaper.

My thoughts turned to Sunday. I'd called Hibiki back a bunch of times after we'd talked, but she still had her phone off. If I couldn't even leave her a message, there was nothing I could do.

But I remembered how happy Iris had looked when she was talking about the amusement park, and I just couldn't bring myself to cancel on her. And Satsuki didn't really let it show, but she seemed to be looking forward to it too.

Well, I wasn't going to spend the entire day at the amusement park. I could just go there in the morning with the two of them, ride a ton of rides, and leave in the evening when they were tired. Then I could go see Hibiki.

Wait, we didn't decide on a time to meet at the station... I'd just have to call her again tomorrow.

"Um... Sir Rekka?"

"Hmm?"

I felt a hesitant tap on my shoulder and turned around to see Harissa looking up into my eyes.

“Umm...”

She was fidgeting like she was too nervous to continue.

“What’s up?”

I nodded her on, and she blushed a little.

“Do you... Do you want to go to this with me?”

Then she handed me a flyer.

“What’s this? ‘Grand reopening sale’?”

“That’s right.”

The flyer was an ad for a sale at a clothing store. From the map, it looked like it was a department store shop in the next town over. All the clothes in the pictures were for girls. It wasn’t the kind of place I really went to. But...

“That’s right. We haven’t bought any clothes for you yet, Harissa.”

I’d just given her my mother’s old clothes. But my mom was tall, and to be honest, she had a figure that made it hard to believe she’d had a kid. Her clothes were way too big for Harissa. She was practically swimming in them. Most of the time, she actually ended up just wearing my old clothes. She didn’t even own a skirt.

“Yeah, this is a good chance to go buy something for you...”

“Y-Yes. So, um...”

“Hmm?”

“If you wouldn’t mind, I’d like you to tell me what clothes you think I look best in...”

The redness in her cheeks turned a deeper shade as she looked up at me.

Normally I’d never turn her down when she was like this, but there was one problem... The flyer said “ONE DAY ONLY!” in big letters. And it was dated for this Sunday. Now I had something else to cram in somehow.

If I was just going to buy clothes for Harissa, I could do it some other day. But I already needed to buy an amusement park ticket, which was going to put a serious dent in my wallet. It would be tough to afford clothes at full price on a budget like that. I’d probably end up eating nothing but rice with boiled plums for the next month.

Actually, the reason Harissa had waited for a sale to bring this up at all was probably because she knew how tight we were financially. There was no way for her to know that I’d already agreed to other plans for that day.

I didn't really have the time—or the money—for this, but Harissa was always helping out around the house, and I couldn't turn her down. After all she'd done for me, I wanted to buy her everything she could ask for.

"Hmm..."

"...Is that not a good day for you, maybe?"

Harissa's shoulders started to slump when she saw my reaction.

"Oh, no, it's fine, just..."

"Then it's okay?!"

"Huh?"

I should've known better than to give her a vague answer, but it was too late for regrets now.

"Yay! I'm so happy! I get to go on a trip with Sir Rekka!"

Harissa hopped up and down on the sofa like a bunny rabbit and wrapped her arms around her chest. Then she jumped off the sofa and turned to me with shining eyes and a huge grin on her face.

"I'll go get the bath ready!" she said as she skipped out of the living room.

...Was there any man on earth who could go after her now and tell her that he didn't mean it? If there was, he'd have to be a hollow, soulless man. The kind of guy that wouldn't even care if you told him the world was about to end. I guarantee it.

"She really wanted some clothes, huh?"

All I could do was whisper to myself.

"That's probably not what Harissa really wants, I think."

Wait. R was there, so I wasn't really just talking to myself.

"..."

Instead of trying to escape reality, I decided to get everything straight in my head. Satsuki and Iris wanted to go to the amusement park. Hibiki was bringing a girl named Chelsea to see me at the station. Harissa wanted to go to a department store sale with me. And I hadn't set a time for meeting with Hibiki yet.

I'd probably have to leave early to make it in time for the sale. And both Harissa's clothes shopping and the amusement park were going to take several hours, so I couldn't just do one in the morning and the other later.

"Man, I don't know what to do..."

Nothing came to me no matter how much I thought. I stared up at the ceiling and whispered...

“Save me, hero…”

Chapter 1: Who Should I Spend Sunday With?

The next day, I still had no clue what I was going to do about Sunday, but my class was making a fuss over something else altogether.

"A transfer student?"

"Yeah, sounds like they're not Japanese either."

"Oh wow..."

A foreign transfer student? That was a rare event. I mean, Iris was a transfer student too, but she was from space, not overseas.

It wasn't long before the bell rang and the teacher brought in the transfer student. She had long, blond hair tied back in twin tails, and she looked... Well, she looked like a lot of things.

"My name is Rosalind C. Bathory!" she declared in a loud, booming voice.

She had the face of a young child, but she talked like a grown woman. She was wearing a high school uniform, but she was only as tall as an elementary school student. And yet somehow, when she stared at the class from across the podium, I got the distinct sense she was looking down at us. But her red eyes stood out the most, thin and narrowed as they looked over the class. I'd seen blue eyes, purple eyes, and even shining eyes before, but red was a first. They were pretty, like rubies.

"..."

I must've been staring, because my gaze met hers for a moment. I quickly looked away... and then took another glance.

"...?"

She was still staring at me. Was she mad, maybe? She didn't really look like it. It was something else... But what was it?

"Rekka!"

"Huh? Oww!" I shouted as someone next to me pulled my ear.

"You're staring at that girl too much! I won't let you cheat on me!"

I had no idea what Iris was talking about, but she just kept pulling harder as she talked. I thought she was going to rip my ear off.

"I-I don't know what's going on, but I'm sorry! I'm sorry, okay?! So stop pulling on my ear!"

"Good. You apologized, so I forgive you. So, anyway, about this Sunday... I want to ride the roller coaster with you. Maybe ten times, I'm thinking?"

"Wh-What?!"

I didn't mind going on a roller coaster, but ten times was overdoing it.

"It'll be fun!"

"Sure, it'll be fun... the first couple of times. Ten times is enough to make you sick, you know?"

"I'll be fine."

Well, maybe Iris would be.

"Hey, don't go deciding things like that without talking to me first. I'm planning our day right now," Satsuki interrupted.

"I should be the one to decide what I ride," Iris said.

"If you don't take the wait times into account, you won't get to ride all the things you want," Satsuki argued.

Free-spirited Iris and careful, meticulous Satsuki were butting heads about how to go about our day at the amusement park. I understood where both of them were coming from, but I wished they would stop scowling at each other while I was between them.

"Namidare, Otomo, Iris! Be quiet!" the teacher yelled.

The whole class was in an uproar over the transfer student, but evidently the three of us had been a little too loud. I reflexively faced forward and shut up after being scolded, but the two of them kept glowering.

It was going to be a long day... And what was I going to do on Sunday, anyway? As I tried for the thousandth time to come up with a plan, my gaze met the transfer student's again.

"...?"

Had she been looking at me the whole time?

"Rosalind, you can take that open seat over there. Also, Namidare, when homeroom is over, I want you to show her around the school."

"Huh? Me?"

"Don't worry about being late for first period. That will be all,

everyone," the teacher announced and quickly left the room, bringing homeroom to a close.

Wait, what happened to class announcements like who had cleaning duty today and things like that? And why did I have to show the new girl around during class instead of on lunch break? As I sat there in shock, Rosalind came walking over to me. I didn't think I could tell her no.

▽

Since I felt like I had no choice, I took Rosalind out of the classroom and into the hallway. What exactly was I supposed to show her, anyway? The special classrooms? This building of the school only had regular classrooms in it, so there wasn't really anything to see here.

"Hmm, I guess we'll start by going over to the special classrooms building. It's this way."

"Slow down."

"Huh?"

"You're walking too fast."

Oops. I forgot Rosalind's stride was a lot shorter than mine. I started walking beside her to match her pace.

"Is that better?"

"Indeed." Rosalind nodded, satisfied, and wrapped her arm around mine.

"...Wait, why are you holding on to my arm?"

"Idiot, don't you know how to escort a lady?"

She looked a little lacking in certain departments to be called a lady, but...

"You were just thinking something you shouldn't have been, weren't you?"

"No, not really..."

She was glaring at me with a terrible intensity, and I quickly looked away.

"Good. Now take me to our destination."

"Sure thing..."

The students we passed were all shocked to see us walking arm in arm, but the hallways cleared out when the bell for first period rang. We walked down the now quiet corridor towards our first stop, the third floor of the special classrooms building.

“Um, this is the music room,” I said, pointing to the sign above the door.

“Indeed.”

“H-Hey, they’re having class right n—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Rosalind stood up on her toes to peer into the classroom through the window in the door. Several of the students saw us. I could see the “what are they doing?” looks on their faces. Man, this was really embarrassing...

“Music and art are electives. I think the music class is practicing the school anthem? I take art, so I don’t really know. In art class, we’re studying the history of art and stuff in our textbooks right now.” I sped through the explanation. I just wanted to get away from here.

“Japanese schools are much tidier than they once were,” Rosalind said as she lowered herself down from the window. “Now take me to the next place.”

She looked up at me expectantly, her twin tails bobbing as she moved her head. Hmm... She was kind of bossy.

After that, I showed her the science labs, the study halls, and a few other places. I made my best attempt to explain the different rooms, but all Rosalind said was, “Indeed.” She didn’t seem very interested. As far as I was concerned, I just wanted to get back to class before first period was over. But since I had to walk at her pace, we were going really slow. That, and she sure liked to talk.

“How old are you?”

“What is your favorite color?”

“Why do Japanese people make their children all wear the same clothes?”

“Are you in love with anyone?”

Even worse, she’d stop walking every time she asked a question, which made things take even longer. And who asks how old their classmates are? Don’t you usually ask for their birthday?

Just when I was thinking that first period was a lost cause, she stopped again.

“By the way, Namidare...”

“Yeah?”

“You seem to be on quite good terms with the two girls who sit next to you.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“...So you admit it, then.”

“Sure? I mean...”

One of them was a childhood friend, and Iris and I had helped each other out of some pretty big problems, so there was a lot of trust and gratitude between us. I didn’t have any reason to deny that we were on good terms.

“Hmph.” Rosalind rubbed her chin and sighed.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing,” she said.

I guess it wasn’t that big of a deal.

I kept walking Rosalind around the school. She was still holding my arm, but now, for some reason, she seemed to be lost in thought. We just barely made it out of the special classrooms building before it was time to switch classes.

“All right,” I said, “Let’s head back to class now.”

At this point, I just wanted to get her off my arm. First period was over and people were starting to come out into the hallways, which meant I was starting to attract stares again. But when I went to unlink my arm from hers, Rosalind pulled on me hard.

“What are you talking about? We still haven’t gone through the main school building.”

“But that’s just a bunch of regular classrooms. There’s not really anything there to see...”

“I’ll be the judge of that. You’re just the guide. Now take me there.”

“But...”

At this rate, we’d be late for second period.

“Or is there some kind of problem?” Rosalind demanded.

She pulled on my arm harder, bringing me towards her. With our faces this close, a sweet scent stimulated my nostrils.

“Do you not like being with me, Namidare? Is that the issue, perhaps?”

“No, that’s not it...”

“Then you want to be with me,” she insisted.

“Wait, huh?”

I wasn’t sure how, but she’d won the argument.

“Come on, stop being so slow!”

“...Fine,” I acquiesced.

I was really wishing I was one of those Japanese people who knew how to put their foot down.

▽

I finally made it back to class near the end of second period. Since I had a good reason, I didn’t get in trouble for being late. And by the time third period started, my day seemed like it was back on schedule.

Fourth period was gym class, and then it was time for lunch break. I got my lunchbox out and waited for Iris and Satsuki to come back from the locker room. It wasn't long before they came in... with Rosalind.

Psst, psst, psst...

The three of them were whispering to each other. Had they gotten to know each other during gym class?

"Welcome back, Satsuki, Iris."

"Hi!"

"Hello!"

"I just saw you two talking with Rosalind. Did you guys play basketball together?"

If I remembered right, that's what the girls were supposed to do during gym class today. Satsuki always liked to help people, so I thought that maybe she'd invited Rosalind to her team since she was the new girl.

"Hmm? No, not really."

But Satsuki shook her head.

"Hmm..."

Then they just happened to start chatting on the way back to class?

"Namidare."

As I was trying to figure it out, the girl in question walked over to me.

"What's up?"

How many times had Rosalind said my name today? She'd taken some kind of weird liking to me.

"I'm told it's time for food now. Take me to this so-called 'cafeteria' of yours."

"I already showed you where it was. You can make it there yourself, right?"

"I don't understand how Japanese currency works," she said.

I guess I didn't have a choice.

"All right. You just need me to do the math and handle the cash for you, right?"

"Indeed." Rosalind smiled, satisfied at my answer. "And after that, why don't you eat lunch with me too?"

"Huh? No, I can't..."

I looked over at Satsuki and Iris, the girls I was originally planning to eat with. But then...

“Sorry, Rekka. I’ve actually got something I have to do,” said Satsuki.

“Huh?”

“Me too!” said Iris.

“Whaaat?”

This was rare, not to mention weird.

“Oh dear. Looks like this is perfect timing for you, huh, Rekka?”

Even R, whose default expression was robotic, seemed a little surprised.

“So yeah, eat lunch with Rosalind,” Satsuki insisted.

“Okay…”

“Bye!” Iris called as she walked away.

The two of them left the room, leaving the other two of us behind.

“Now let us go,” Rosalind said.

“I don’t mind going with you, but…”

I wished she would stop grabbing my arm.

For Rosalind, this was probably just a typical “escort,” but I didn’t think it made any sense to treat me like a British gentleman. I could see the other boys in the class staring at me. Their eyes seemed to say, “Now he’s even hooking up with the transfer student?” Some of them were cracking their knuckles.

“…Anybody want to come with us?” I said, hoping to lighten the mood a little. But Rosalind just started pouting.

“Namidare. By ‘us,’ I meant you and me.”

She only made things worse. I realized staying here any longer would just mean more rumors, so I ran out of the classroom, dragging along Rosalind, who was still clinging to my arm.

“You’re walking too fast.”

It was the same thing she’d said this morning, so I slowed down as we headed for the cafeteria.

“Hey, why did you decide you wanted to eat lunch with me?” I asked.

“The reason is extremely simple. Out of all the people here, you’re the one who’s easiest to talk to,” she replied.

Well, I was the one who’d shown her around, after all.

“You’re so popular! Go you!” R cheered half-heartedly.

I glared at her to shut her up.

We eventually made it to the cafeteria.

“Hmm… There are so many types of bread here. Do they have

red bean jam buns?" Rosalind asked as she inspected what was for sale.

"You know about those, huh?"

I'd thought that red bean jam was something unique to Japanese sweets, but evidently even a foreign girl like Rosalind knew about it.

"I only know them by name. I've always wanted to try one."

Rosalind bought herself a cream bun and a red bean jam bun, and I got some English tea for each of us out of the vending machine. She then announced that she wanted to go to the roof.

"We're not going back to the classroom?"

"I want to eat up there," she replied.

Well, I didn't really feel like going back to the classroom, so it was fine by me.

A cool breeze swept across my face as I stepped out onto the roof. The weather was good, and thanks to the wind, it wasn't too hot. It was the perfect day to eat outside.

I sat down next to Rosalind on the bench.

"Did you bring your own lunch, Namidare?"

"Yeah. Satsuki made it today."

"...Satsuki makes your lunches?"

"Yeah. Satsuki and another girl take turns."

"Another girl...?"

Rosalind seemed shocked for some reason, but I ignored her and started to dig in.

"Come on, you should eat too," I said.

"I-Indeed..."

Her expression was still a little stiff, but Rosalind stuffed a straw into her little container of tea and began to sip.

Slurrrp...

"Eww."

"Not even giving it a chance, huh?"

She'd barely even taken a sip. I was a little surprised.

"If I ever meet the person who decided to call this tea, I'm going to kill them."

"That's a little extreme, isn't it?"

"I'll start with you."

"Why?!"

"You committed a grave sin in making me drink this."

"Wait, wait, wait!" She sounded like she was joking, but her

eyes looked dead serious. “Here, calm down and try this red bean jam bun.”

I ripped open the bag for the bun she hadn’t eaten yet and forced it into her hands.

“…”

She stared at me, then at the bun, then back at me… and finally decided to eat the bread before she made any attempt on my life. It might just have been because her hands were full, though.

Her tiny mouth took a big bite out of the round bun. If she didn’t like it, was she really going to kill me…? I waited nervously for her to finish.

“It tastes like nothing.”

“You just haven’t gotten to the bean jam yet! Take another big bite!” I yelled.

She took a second bite with her tiny mouth, this time surely deep enough to reach the jam. The bite was a little too big for her, and her cheeks plumped up like a chipmunk’s as she chewed.

“…”

“Well?”

Chomp.

She took another bite without answering me. This time, she carefully chose a part where there was jam. The jam, at least, she seemed to like. I sighed in relief as I began to eat my own lunch once more.

▽

After school, at the shoe lockers near the front entrance of the school…

“Namidare.”

“Again…?”

“Why do you look so annoyed?”

“No, sorry. I was just thinking that we keep running into each other.”

“Of course we do. We’re in the same class.”

“Hmm… That’s not really what I meant.”

I couldn’t exactly tell her that I was getting a little sick of her after she’d dragged me around all day. I was your average Japanese person—extremely reticent and unable to speak bluntly about what was on my mind.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. Let’s go home together,” she said.

“Yeah, I guess that’s okay. But...” I held my index finger out as if to make a point. “No arm-holding.”

“No? Why ever not?”

“Not outside.”

“Hmph...” Rosalind’s eyes narrowed unhappily.

For a moment, there was a serious tension between us, but...

“Gotcha!”

“Ack!”

It ended with my defeat.

“That’s better. Now let’s go.”

“...Right.”

I didn’t have the energy left to argue anymore, so I started to walk with Rosalind on my arm anyway.

Now that I thought about it, I was so busy dealing with her today that I didn’t have time to talk to Satsuki and Iris about Sunday. I would need to get the scheduling and stuff all worked out tomorrow. I told myself that just making the plans wouldn’t cost me anything.

“Namidare, I still don’t know this city well. Show me around.”

But there she went again...

Fine. Did some mysterious power dictate that I was going to spend my day being dragged around by a bossy princess? That had to be what it was. Definitely.

And I was too much of a wuss to refuse, too.

“What’s wrong? Hurry up.”

“Right, right. As you wish, my princess,” I said without really thinking about it.

Her expression completely changed.

“...Namidare...”

Her haughty attitude and arrogance were gone in the blink of an eye, and she was now whispering my name like she was in some kind of dreamy trance. Her red eyes looked up at me, moist with tears.

“Huh? Is there something on my face?”

I didn’t understand why she was looking at me like that, so I said the first thing that came to mind.

“N-Never mind!”

But Rosalind cut me off, then let go of my arm and quickly moved away from me. This only confused me more.

“What’s wrong?”

“I said never mind!”

“But…”

“Be quiet! I said never mind, so never mind it!”

“…?”

What a weird girl. She was fine when she was holding my arm, but the minute she let go, she started to blush.

“Y-You can show me around some other time.”

“Okay.” I sighed in relief.

“Why do you look so happy?” Rosalind glared at me.

“Oh, um…”

“Just so you know, I’m not letting you out of this. Oh, I know! You can show me around on Sunday. We’ll spend the whole day together.”

“What?!”

The timing was so perfectly awful, I didn’t know what to do.

“Hold on! I’ve got plans on Sunday!”

“What…?” One of Rosalind’s eyebrows twitched. “Do you mean with those Satsuki and Iris girls?”

“Y-Yeah, that’s right… How did you know?”

“Intuition.”

“A woman’s intuition is a scary thing, huh?” R said, as blasé as ever.

But I had to agree.

“W-Well, anyway, I’ve got plans with them, so I can’t go on Sunday. Maybe next Sunday?”

“…”

I offered a compromise, but Rosalind ignored me.

“O-Okay, well, see you tomorrow!”

She only seemed more upset now, so I ran off to get away from her as quickly as I could.

▽

“Sir Rekka! Wake up!”

“Harissa…?”

I woke up to the sensation of someone shaking me. Harissa was standing over me, wearing her apron.

“Good morning, Sir Rekka.”

“Yeah, morning… Gimme another five minutes…”

“It’s time to wake up though!”

Harissa ripped off my blankets with a smile before I could succumb to the temptations of sleep once more. Lately it felt like she was showing less and less mercy... but maybe that was just because I was so lazy.

"Hmm..."

Have you ever wondered if there are fairies that live in your covers that make you sleepy? Maybe that's why when the blankets come off, you suddenly stop feeling so tired. That's how it was for me. At least, it was usually. When I sat up, I still felt a little out of it today.

"Sir Rekka! If you don't get ready quick, you'll be late!"

"Huh...? Gah, you're right!"

I'd woken up about ten minutes later than usual. But now that I was completely alert, I jumped out of bed and hurriedly began to change.

"Okay, I'll be waiting downstairs," Harissa said.

"Thanks."

"Oh, by the way..."

"Hm?"

Harissa sounded a little hesitant, almost like she had something to say but didn't really want to say it. I turned around and looked at her.

"Sir Rekka, is there any chance you had a fight with Satsuki yesterday?"

"Huh? Why?"

"Well, um..." She started mumbling. "Satsuki didn't come to make you breakfast this morning."

"Huh...?"

▽

Before I left for school, I decided to go next door to the Otomo residence to check in on Satsuki.

"Huh? Satsuki left the house a while ago. She didn't come over to your place?" Satsuki's mom seemed confused too when I asked about her.

She wasn't sick or anything... So why didn't she come to my house this morning?

“So she went to school by herself then? I wonder what happened...”

“Well, I can ask her at school, I guess.”

I bowed to her mom and headed for school myself, wondering all the while what was going on.

When I got to class, Satsuki was already in her seat. So was Iris.

“...?”

Normally when I came in, Iris would make a scene. Sometimes she’d even jump up and give me a hug. But today...

“Oh, good morning, Rekka.”

That was all I got.

“Yeah... Good morning.”

It seemed like something might be up with her too. Today was shaping up to be a weird day.

“Morning, Satsuki.”

“Good morning, Rekka.”

I exchanged morning greetings with Satsuki. Normally we came to school together every day, so it was really rare for us to say good morning like this.

“Sorry about this morning. I had something important to do...”

As I sat down, she raised her hand in front of her face and apologized.

“Well, if you had something important to do, it’s not a big deal... But next time, send me a text message or something if you can. Harissa seemed like she had a pretty rough time this morning.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’ll be more considerate next time.”

And that was all she said before she went back to studying for first period.

What in the world was going on? Both of them were acting strange, but I couldn’t tell why. Maybe I had done something to tick them off? After turning the possibility over in my head, I realized what was going on. I dropped my head to my desk.

Th-They must have found out about Sunday!

Wait, wait... Sure, I was at fault for letting everything pile up on the same day, but there was no way for Satsuki or Iris to know about that, right? Hibiki didn’t even have anybody else’s contact info, so there was no way she could have told them.

No, wait. Maybe Harissa ran into Satsuki somewhere, and she happened to mention our Sunday shopping trip. That was certainly possible, right? That was why Satsuki skipped coming to my place.

And then when she got to school, she told Iris. That must be why they were acting like this. And maybe Harissa was still acting normal because Satsuki hadn't said anything to her about the amusement park when they talked. Surely the kind-hearted Satsuki could tell how much Harissa was looking forward to buying clothes and didn't want to disappoint her, right?

Ugh... The more I thought about it, the more likely it seemed. And the more I thought about it, the more the sweat started to pour down my face. Maybe when I raised my head again, I would magically go back in time to yesterday... No, there was no sense in running from reality.

For now, I should just apologize, explain, and see if there was some way to work things out with everyone. What was really important was making things right. This was my fault. Actually, I should've just apologized yesterday before I stressed out over it so much.

Okay...

"Satsuki, Iris."

I prepared myself to confess, but...

"Namidare!"

"Gwaah!"

Someone suddenly yanked on my collar from behind, effectively choking me.

"R-Rosalind! I can't breathe!"

"Indeed. You're so overjoyed to see me that even breathing is difficult, isn't it?"

"I... I meant literally!"

"No need to be embarrassed." Rosalind giggled. She clearly didn't feel bad about it at all.

"Man, you've got a lot of self-confidence..."

It was kind of amazing, actually. What's more, now I'd lost my chance to talk to Satsuki and Iris.

"So, Namidare, there's something I still don't understand."

"Ugh... Fine! What is it now?"

It was just the beginning of the school day. I'd still have plenty of opportunities to apologize. I decided to let it go for now and wait for my next chance to talk to Satsuki and Iris. Or at least, that was the plan...

▽

First period break.

“Okay, now I’m going to...”

Second period break.

“Next time, for sure...”

Third period break.

“Okay, next time...”

Lunch.

“Both of them are busy again, huh?”

“Namidare, what bread do you recommend today?”

Fifth period break.

“Grr....”

Before I knew it, it was time for afternoon homeroom at the end of the day.

“How did this happen?”

I’d managed to miss every single chance to talk to them. Every time I tried, they were gone. Even during lunch when I was sure I’d see them, they both had said they were busy.

This was serious. It was too big of a deal for me to just whisper an apology or pass a note during class. This was the kind of thing where I needed to look them in the eyes and apologize properly.

“Okay, see you all tomorrow,” the homeroom teacher said, signaling that school was over.

“See you tomorrow, Rekka.”

“Bye!”

“W-Wait, guys!” I quickly called out to Satsuki and Iris, who were gathering up their things to leave.

“What is it?” Satsuki asked.

“Um...”

Come on, just say it! You can’t miss this chance! Tomorrow is Saturday! That’s just the day before! It’ll be too late then!

“I-I’m just really sorry! It was my fault!” I yelled as I bowed. A lot of the other students looked at me oddly, but I wasn’t worried about them right now.

“What’s gotten into you, Rekka?” asked Satsuki.

Iris just looked like she had a giant floating question mark above her head.

“I mean... I know you’re mad about Sunday, so...”

“Sunday?”

“You know. The three of us are supposed to go to the amusement park.”

“The amusement park...?”

“The three of us...?”

Iris and Satsuki glanced at one another. A moment later, they looked at me in confusion.

“Were we going to an amusement park this weekend?” they both asked.

“...Huh?”

My eyes went wide at this unexpected response.

“I don’t really understand, but are you sure you didn’t imagine it or something? ...Oh, sorry. I’m in a hurry, so I have to go now. I’ll see you at school on Monday.”

“Me too! I’ve gotta get back! Bye!”

I watched in astonishment as Satsuki and Iris left.

Wh-What was going on here? It was like they had forgotten about the whole thing, despite the fact that it was all they could talk about two days ago. And just yesterday morning, they were even arguing about which rides we were going to go on. There was no way they could have just forgotten.

Wait, was this their way of saying just an apology wasn’t good enough?! No, both Satsuki and Iris could be a little too quick to fly off the handle at times, but were either of them really the type to play dumb and string me along because they were mad? Something didn’t seem right. There was seriously no way they could have just up and forgotten, but I couldn’t think of any other way to explain this.

“Oh my. Do you suppose you really pissed them off?” R asked.

She seemed totally uninterested, but I couldn’t afford to be.

I tried to run after them, but...

“Namidare.”

“Gweeh!”

My collar closed around my throat, and for a moment, I almost blacked out.

“Rosalind! What the heck was that for?”

“I heard what you were saying just now.” She ignored my angry yell and grinned as she pulled my collar tighter. “Looks like your Sunday just opened up. Now you don’t have anything to worry about, so you can show me around the city.”

It sounded like she’d overheard us and had come over to seal the deal on what she and I had talked about yesterday.

“I don’t know about that yet. I need to apologize to them first,

and then I'll get back to you. So let me go."

To be honest, I was in a hurry, but I knew I might hurt her if I tried to shake her off. I asked her to let go instead, but she didn't listen.

"You don't know when to give up, I see. It's clear that they're both sick of you."

Her words felt like a dagger in my chest.

"S-Sick of me...?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?"

W-Was it? Is that what it was? They were sick of me? I mean, sure, they were both looking forward to the amusement park, and I'd scheduled not one, but two other things on top of it... Sure, that was really bad, but still!

"Rekka, are you seriously depressed over this?" R asked.

Sure I was.

"You are the densest man in the universe, past, present, or future. Hands down. What right do you have to be melodramatic?"

R was just making it worse. Rather than being stabbed, it felt like my heart was being ripped out now.

When I thought about the fact that they were so mad that they'd straight up pretend to have forgotten when I apologized... Now that they were leaving me behind, my legs felt too heavy to run after them.

But Rosalind, on the other hand, seemed in a better mood than ever. She patted me on the back as if trying to make me feel better.

"Well, I guess you'll just have to give up and go with me instead. Now that you're free, in fact, you should be grateful to me for spending time with you."

"I've actually got other plans for Sunday."

"What?!" Her smile vanished. "You turned me down because you had plans with them. Isn't that what you said?"

"Yeah, but... Man, that doesn't matter right now."

"It does matter!"

Rosalind was screaming for whatever reason, but I decided just to ignore her. The only thing on my mind right now was how to get back on Iris's and Satsuki's good sides. If a simple apology wasn't good enough, I needed to do something to show them that I really meant it.

But how, exactly...? I'd just have to sort out the schedule for Sunday, solve the problem, and apologize again. Yeah, that was the

thing to do. I could go buy Harissa's clothes some other day. If I only ate rice for the next month, I'd be able to afford it. Of course, I'd still have to apologize to her too, for changing our plans.

The real problem was Hibiki, who still had her phone off. I'd just have to keep calling her until she picked up. All right. Now that I had a plan, I started to head for home, when...

"Hold it!"

"Guh-hwah!"

For the third time today, I got choked.

"Wh-What is your problem?! If you don't knock it off, I'm seriously going to get mad!" I yelled.

"Shut up! Answer my question!" Rosalind yelled back just as loudly. "Who are you heading out to go shopping with on Sunday?!"

"Harissa."

There was no real reason I had to tell her, but I didn't think she'd relent unless I did, so I reluctantly gave her Harissa's name.

"And what's your relationship with this Harissa girl?"

"How is that any of your business? She's this girl who lives with me."

"You've got a girl living with you?!"

"She doesn't have anywhere else to go!"

The rest of the class already knows about Harissa, but please don't say anything that would make it sound worse!

It felt like this conversation had already bottomed out in that regard, but right now I was more concerned about lost time.

"Anyway, I answered your question, okay? I'm leaving now!"

"...Hmph!" Rosalind scowled as she let go.

If anybody should be mad right now, it was me... But I didn't have time to let it get to me. I grabbed my bag and quickly ran out of the classroom.

▽

When I got home from school, the first thing I wanted to do was talk to Harissa about Sunday, but she was out shopping and the house was empty.

In order to save money, she'd look at advertisements to find out which stores were having sales, then go to multiple places to get what she needed at the best prices. If I tried to go out and find her,

odds were good I'd just miss her. So I did the next best thing—sit on the living room sofa and twiddle my thumbs as I waited for her to get home.

"Harissa's running awfully late..."

I caught myself glancing at the clock over and over again. I was having trouble staying calm. But as time passed, my head started to clear a little and I realized there was a problem that I hadn't thought about yet. How exactly was I supposed to bring this up with Harissa?

I was planning on buying her clothes even if it meant I had to live on a diet of rice and water, but that wasn't the issue. If we were going to go shopping on a different day, she'd want to know why. That meant I'd have to tell her that I triple-booked my schedule. And I'd just learned how angry and hurt that could make someone. Even if I was going to be honest with her, I still needed to consider the best way to go about doing it.

"But how do I tell her...?"

I couldn't come up with anything.

I put my sweaty face in my sweaty palms. My vision went black. Maybe I could just fade away into that darkness... No, I couldn't just run away from reality. It always has a way of catching up to you.

I suddenly heard the sound of a key turning in the front door. Harissa was back.

"Oh, you're home, Sir Rekka. Welcome home."

"Hey. You too, Harissa," I said.

"Thanks. I just got back from the store," she replied, smiling as she held up the plastic bags she was carrying.

"Let me help you with those."

"Thank you, Sir Rekka."

I took a bag from Harissa and walked with her to the kitchen.

"So, um... What's for dinner?"

"Tonight I'm trying something new called cabbage rolls."

"I see. Sounds good."

"It's my first time making them, so I'm not sure if I can do it right or not. But I'll do my best!" Harissa gave me a thumbs-up and began to put on her apron. "Can you put the milk and eggs in the refrigerator and leave the rest out?"

"Roger."

I did as she asked, pulling the milk and eggs out of the bags and

putting them away.

"..."

"Is something wrong, Sir Rekka?" Harissa asked when she saw me still standing there.

"Um... I was wondering if I could help with something."

"I still have leftover rice from this morning, so not really."

"I-I see..."

"What's wrong, Sir Rekka? You always let me cook dinner."

"Well..." I was just trying to find the right time to bring up Sunday! Gah! This was pathetic! How was I so pathetic!? "Arrggaaah!"

"Wh-What's wrong, Sir Rekka?!" Harissa asked in a worried voice when she saw me starting to rip out my own hair.

Stop it! Don't look at me with those kind eyes! Their purifying light is burning my black, guilty soul!

A part of me began to realize that I was getting a little too worked up about this.

Yeah. I was too worked up. And an idiot to boot. I just needed to stop beating around the bush and apologize.

"L-Listen, Harissa."

"Yes?"

"About Sunday..."

"Sunday?"

"Yeah. I need to talk to you about our outing this weekend."

"Oh, our outing...?" Harissa set the knife she was holding down on the cutting board, then put her finger to her lips in thought. "I'm sorry, were you and I going on an outing Sunday?"

"...?!"

For a moment, I didn't understand the words coming out of her mouth. When it finally set in, I felt even more confused than I had a moment ago.

Was this enough to make even gentle Harissa snap?! I wanted to scream that this was impossible... The only thing I could think of was that Satsuki and Iris must have gotten her in on their plan. Part of me couldn't believe that all three of them were really plotting against me like this, but it was certainly more likely than all of them forgetting.

"Dinner will be ready in about forty minutes, so go relax until then, Sir Rekka."

"...Right."

All I could do was nod and obey.

▽

Saturday.

I lay stretched out on my bed, counting specks on the ceiling. It was already past three, but I still hadn't left my room except for breakfast and lunch.

"Hahh..." I let out a deep sigh for the thousandth time that day.

I knew I was the one at fault here, but I was still shaking in fear. They were much angrier than I thought they'd be. Even worse, they weren't letting it show at all.

Harissa had come to wake me up this morning, just like always. Breakfast and lunch were great. She'd even cleaned my room. All with her usual sweet smile... That was the truly scary part.

Knock knock.

"Sir Rekka!"

"Gyaaah!"

When I saw Harissa poke her head through the door, my heart jumped so violently that I fell right off the bed.

"S-Sir Rekka? What's wrong?"

"N-Nothing. You scared me a little. That's all."

"I did knock..."

"Really, it's nothing. S-So what's up? Did you need something?"

"You've been in your room all day, so I thought that maybe something was wrong..."

"Oh... No, it's nothing. It's nothing at all, ma'am."

Did I just say "ma'am"?

"I see..." Harissa's brow furrowed with worry, but she nodded and closed the door.

I listened carefully for the sound of her running downstairs. When I was sure she was back on the first floor, I let out a long sigh as the tension drained from my shoulders.

Th-That was crazy! I had no idea Harissa was so good at acting! She was acting like she was really worried about me and that she wasn't mad about Sunday at all! She could be an actress!

"Th-That scared me. Girls scare me."

I was so scared that I actually started to cry. R looked down at me from above the bed, annoyed.

"You're such a wimp."

“Shut up! I don’t know how to make them forgive me now!”

“Don’t cry. Please.”

Easy for her to say. This was really starting to get to me.

“Don’t tell me that this ends up giving you a bad case of gynophobia, and that’s really what starts the War of All,” R said.

God, I hope not...

Rrrrring! Rrrrring!

My phone’s ringtone began to play. I grabbed the rattling device off my desk... then promptly dropped it on the floor.

“What’s wrong?” R did a mid-air flip as she looked at the phone’s LCD display. “Oh, it’s Hibiki.”

“...”

“You’re not going to answer it?”

“...Fine. I needed to talk to her about Sunday anyway.”

Granted, last night I’d been too scared to even attempt to call her again. I was too worried she’d found out about Sunday too. And it took courage to press the answer button even now... But no matter what she was thinking, refusing to answer would just tick her off. I fearfully pressed the button.

“H-Hibiki...?”

“You’re too slow. I told you to pick up faster next time.”

“Y-Yeah! I’m sorry!”

“Waah! ...Y-You don’t need to yell when you apologize.”

From the tone of her voice, I could tell that she was a little confused. My voice might’ve cracked when I talked. That’s how scared I was.

What angle was she going to use to get back at me? Just thinking about it made my blood run cold.

“Well, whatever. So here’s the deal...”

“...!”

I immediately tensed up when she started to speak.

“We need to pick a time for tomorrow’s meeting. How does 5:00 P.M. sound?”

“...Huh?”

“I said 5:00 P.M. Chelsea will be getting back about an hour before then, so if it works for you, that’s when I’d like to...”

“N-No! Wait a second!” I yelled to cut her off before she could say anything else, but it was more out of shock than fear this time.

“Don’t yell! I’m holding my phone to my ear, you know?!”

“Waah! I’m sorry! Wait, I mean... You aren’t mad, Hibiki?”

“Mad about what?”

I almost physically collapsed in relief. Evidently she hadn’t talked to Satsuki or the others. No, wait... Just because she hadn’t found out didn’t make things any easier. I still hadn’t actually solved the problem.

“Listen, Hibiki...”

First, I needed to apologize, and then I needed to work out a solution with her. I sat kneeling on the bed as I told her how I’d agreed to multiple, overlapping things for Sunday. I explained to her what had happened over the past few days, including that I might need to adjust our meeting time a little.

“Are you an idiot?” she asked as soon as I finished.

“Yes. Probably. I’m very sorry.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. Well, I mean, you’re an idiot about that too, but...” She trailed off for a moment. “You should be paying a little more attention to changes that happen around you.”

“Changes?”

“You know that you and I have a tendency to get caught up in weird stuff, right?”

“Yeah, of course.”

My Namidare bloodline and Hibiki’s Banjo bloodline both caused us to get involved in stories that otherwise lacked a hero. Sometimes it would be our job to take the place of a hero and save a story that was heading for a bad ending.

“Listen, whenever you’re getting caught up in a story—that is, whenever things are about to get real—there’s always some kind of sign.”

“Some kind of sign? You mean the changes you’re talking about?”

“That’s right.” According to Hibiki, whenever something like that happened, she would assume that a “story” was coming and she needed to get prepared. She continued, “Listen, you need to be doing the same thing.”

“You’re exactly right.”

It was normal for Hibiki to get frustrated with me, but since people hadn’t been getting mad at me for the last few days even when I deserved it, it actually made me happy.

“You understand now, right? Think about it. What’s changed around you lately?”

A change, huh? I knew what she was talking about

immediately.

"Rosalind."

"That's right. You mentioned her name a few times. I think you should assume she's suspicious."

"Hmm... But can an ordinary transfer student wipe people's memories?"

"You're the one who said everyone was acting weird, right? I don't really know them well, but I do think it's strange for them to try to get even with you in such a nasty way."

"Why?"

"That's because both they and I... Wait, what are you trying to make me say?!"

"H-Huh?"

I'd barely said a word. What was she mad about?

"Ahem. Anyway..." She cleared her throat and then continued. "You don't know that this transfer student is 'normal' at all, do you?"

"Huh... No, I guess I don't."

A month ago I would've thought it was a joke, but now it was normal for me to assume that she wasn't normal at all. I guess you really can get used to anything, huh? That's kind of alarming.

"Changes like Satsuki suddenly not eating lunch with you or coming to your house in the morning sure seem convenient for this Rosalind girl, given how much she seems to want to be your friend. And she had no problem chatting with the other girls on the first day, right? So even if you're easy to talk to, why be so clingy towards you?"

"That's true."

Rosalind certainly didn't seem like the shy type at all.

"Is it possible that the reason all three of them seem to have forgotten about Sunday has to do with Rosalind? Any idea why she might do something like that?"

"...Yeah."

She'd asked me to show her around town on Sunday. Now that Hibiki mentioned it, Satsuki and Iris had only "forgotten" about the amusement park after I'd turned Rosalind down. I even told her I couldn't go with her because I had plans with the two of them. Come to think of it, the same thing had happened with Harissa.

But it wasn't like I'd told Rosalind I'd never go with her. I even offered to do it Saturday or next weekend. It was like she was

obsessed with Sunday. So much so that she wanted to stop me from going out with the other girls.

"But why me?" I asked.

At this point it seemed pretty clear that Rosalind was behind it, but I still didn't know why.

"No idea. That much I can't tell you."

"Of course..."

"The fastest way would be to ask her. But I wouldn't recommend it."

"Why not?"

"What's your plan if Rosalind wants to hurt you somehow?"

I gasped.

"I don't know what I might've done to tick her off, though..."

"I'm not certain about that myself. But with the way our bloodlines work, if you don't prepare yourself, you're going to regret it."

"I hate to say it, but you're right."

I sighed. And just as I did, I heard the front doorbell ring. A moment later, I heard Harissa coming up the stairs to my room.

"Sir Rekka, you have a visitor."

"I do?"

"Yes."

Who was it? Regardless, I knew if I had company, I couldn't stay on the phone. Talking to Hibiki would just have to wait.

"Sorry, I've gotta go for now. Can we talk about this more when we meet tomorrow?"

"Affirmative. But we're definitely meeting in front of the station tomorrow evening, right?"

"That's right."

"All right, then I'll see you at 5:00 P.M. tomorrow."

"Right."

I hung up the phone and put it back on my desk.

"I've asked them to wait in the living room."

"Got it. Thanks, Harissa."

After thanking Harissa, I made my way downstairs. I casually opened the door to the living room... and froze.

"Hmph. I can't say I approve of keeping a lady waiting."

"Rosalind..."

Speak of the devil. Sitting on my sofa was the girl I was just talking about, wearing a gothic lolita-style dress. She smiled as she

stood up and slowly walked towards me.

"So this is your house, is it? It's a nice place."

"Yeah..."

"But I can't say I approve of that unkempt hair. Take more care in your appearance."

"Right..."

"You're not going to sit down?"

She looked up at me with a gleam in her red eyes. There was something... hypnotizing about them. But mostly I was taken aback by the situation I'd found myself in not a minute after Hibiki had told me to get prepared. I'd been way too careless.

"Sure, I'll go get a chair."

"Why? You can just sit on the sofa."

I still didn't know what she was after, so I decided to just do what she wanted. I sat down with her.

"Wait, why are you so close to me?" I asked.

"It's a small sofa. I don't have a choice."

No way. The sofa wasn't that small. Rosalind was about Harissa's size, and we always had plenty of room sitting on the couch together.

"Heh. Don't be so nervous." Rosalind giggled a little as she pushed herself up against me.

There was no way for me *not* to be nervous. Not after the conversation I'd just had with Hibiki.

"Wait, how do you know where I live again?"

"Hmm? Oh, Satsuki showed me," Rosalind said, rather unconvincingly.

Once I started thinking of her as suspicious, everything she did seemed suspicious. But I still didn't know what her game was.

"So what brings you here today?" I asked, my voice a little stiff.

"What else? I'm here to talk about our trip around town tomorrow."

At least I'd mostly expected that part.

"I thought I told you that wasn't happening."

"Indeed. But I'm a girl who just doesn't know when to give up, so I've come to ask you again. Are you sure you can't grant me this one little favor?" Rosalind stretched up to whisper in my ear.

It was cute, like a bratty little princess begging to get her way... But it also seemed like she was confident that I had no good reason to refuse now. She didn't know Harissa at all, so she had no way of

knowing that our shopping trip had to be canceled. So why was she acting this way? The alarm bells in my mind got louder.

"Sorry..." I forced the words out of my dry throat. "I'm meeting with someone tomorrow."

"……WHAT?!" There was a long pause before Rosalind responded in loud surprise. "Meeting with someone... You mean someone ELSE?!"

"Y-Yeah, I guess."

"How many people did you make plans with?!" Rosalind yelled.

In any other situation, I'd be on my knees apologizing. But right now I was too busy trying to figure out a way out of this mess.

"...So who is it this time? Another girl?"

Just as I expected, Rosalind wanted to know who it was. Was she going to try and make them "forget" about it too?

"...!"

It suddenly hit me. What would you do if somebody asked you about a promise you couldn't remember making? Wouldn't you try to find out more about it? Satsuki, Iris, Harissa... Not one of them had asked a single question about our plans together. Not where, when, or why. They'd shown zero interest in the matter and ended the conversation as quickly as possible. Moreover, Satsuki and Iris had been deliberately avoiding me since then.

What if Rosalind's power wasn't the power to make others forget, but the power to control them? If that was the case, then even if I tried to lie to her now, wouldn't she just control me and force me to tell her anyway?

"What's wrong, Namidare? Aren't you going to tell me?"

"What will you do if I tell you? Will you 'control' them too?"

"..."

Rosalind's expression changed. That had definitely put her on her guard... but if I didn't want Hibiki to be in danger, I had to face her here.

"Who are you? What do you want from me?" I asked as I stood up from the sofa and backed away.

If Harissa was under Rosalind's control, that meant I couldn't just grab her and run. I had to find out what Rosalind was after and get her to let the others go. Besides, she hadn't hurt me so far. Maybe that wasn't her goal after all. At least, that's what I was hoping. But...

"...Why isn't this as easy as I thought it would be?"

There was an air of disappointment in her words, and her whole demeanor changed. She no longer seemed like a little girl. She was a dangerous monster.

“...Gah!”

For a moment, I didn’t even know what had happened. The next thing I knew, Rosalind’s fingers were closing around my throat and digging into my skin. She’d grabbed my windpipe and slammed me into the wooden floor.

“R-Rosalind...?”

“I didn’t want to use this power on you...”

Rosalind was on top of me now, leaning in close to my face.

“Tch...!”

I-I couldn’t move! She was a tiny girl far smaller than me, but no matter how hard I tried to push her off, I couldn’t move. She was a lot stronger than a girl her size should be.

She stared down at me. There was a dangerous flash in her red eyes. For some reason, I couldn’t look away from their crimson light...

“Now, look into my eyes.”

Rosalind brought her face closer to mine, slowly but surely. And everything went red.

Chapter 2: Red Eyes and a Silver Blade

Sunday. A clear day without a cloud in the sky.

“I guess I’m a little early, huh?” I said to myself as I looked up at the station clock.

I was waiting for someone, but I didn’t see her yet. It wasn’t a big station, so I couldn’t have missed her... Oh, there she was.

“Hmph. I’m glad to see you’re here early,” said the girl I was waiting for. It was Rosalind wearing a white dress.

“Of course. I’m the one who’s showing you around town, remember?”

“Hehe, I know that,” she said as she naturally took my arm. “So give me the grand tour, Namidare.”

“Right.”

Rosalind had just transferred to my school, and today was the day I was supposed to introduce her to the city.

“This is your first date, huh, Rekka?”

It is not. I’m not into lolicon.

R was floating around me snarking like always, but I had to keep my comments to myself.

“Now, is there somewhere you want to go?”

“I’ll let you decide, Namidare.”

“I don’t know, though... I can show you where the library and hospital and things are.”

“How boring.” She shot the idea down.

“Then someplace more fun? Hmm... Maybe we should take the train somewhere?”

“I dislike crowds.”

“Then where do you want to go?”

“I couldn’t say. Isn’t that what you’re supposed to be showing me?”

“...All right, I guess we can just wander around for a while. If you see anything that catches your eye, we can stop in.”

“That will do nicely.”

I didn’t have the slightest idea where we were going to go, but if Rosalind was okay with it, I figured it was fine. We left the plaza in front of the station and started to walk.

There was a big highway that ran through the town, so there were a lot of stations and shops built up nearby. But there were no movie theaters or department stores, and there weren’t any good places for teenagers to hang out. The bustling shops were really our only option, but we didn’t go into any of them. Because...

“It’s pretty small, but there’s an arcade near here.”

“I don’t like noisy places.”

“Want to visit the bookstore?”

“Reading isn’t my thing.”

Every suggestion I made was met with disapproval. The one place she showed any interest in was a bakery that had a good reputation.

“Do they have red bean jam buns?” Rosalind asked as she pulled me into the shop. She looked around at the rows of shelves lined with bread.

“Sure, if they haven’t sold out.”

Every bakery had them. We didn’t have any trouble finding them on the shelves, and we both got one. I picked up three other kinds of pastries, checked out, and took Rosalind into the back of the store. They had four sets of tables and chairs set up so you could sit down and eat what you just bought. As we showed up, a married couple was just leaving, so we were able to get a table.

“Okay, let’s eat.”

“Indeed. Let’s eat.”

Rosalind put her hands together in a manner that indicated she still wasn’t used to making the gesture, then picked up her red bean jam bun.

“Hom nom! Hmm... This has a very different texture than the ones they sell at school.”

“Yeah? Maybe because it’s freshly baked,” I said as I took a bite of my own.

The bread did feel a little softer than the ones from the cafeteria. Yeah. It was good. No wonder this place was popular.

In an instant I’d wolfed down three pastries. Rosalind was sitting across from me, still eating hers. Her little mouth was moving as fast it could, but she wasn’t making a very big dent in it.

Hmm... There was one tart left, but it was something Rosalind had chosen.

"You really do love red bean jam, huh?" I said, hoping to fill the silence.

"It's got a different kind of sweetness than chocolate and cakes. I like that. I'm glad I remembered the name from so long ago."

"Long ago? So you've been to Japan before, Rosalind?"

I'd just met her, so I barely knew anything about her.

"Hmm... Yes. Once before," she said, looking down for a moment.

Was it something she didn't want to talk about?

"Huh? So where'd you learn that weird Japanese then?" I changed the subject in hopes of getting her mind off of it.

"It's not weird at all, simpleton."

"But you sound like an old lady."

"Ngwah! Well, excuse me!"

"Hahaha..."

"Hmph. What are you laughing at?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking about the incredible difference between the way you look and the way you talked when you first introduced yourself."

"You are so rude!"

Rosalind indignantly turned away and started pouting. I guess I made her a little angry, but I was glad to see her in slightly better spirits.

"Sorry. Here, I'll get you some coffee."

The bakery offered complimentary tea and coffee to its customers. Since she didn't seem to like cheap tea, I decided to get her coffee instead. I poured some into two paper cups and took them back to the table.

"...It's awful."

Turns out the coffee didn't fare any better than tea.

"I guess anything that's not made with proper leaves or beans isn't going to be good enough for you, huh?"

"What? They make coffee without beans in Japan?"

"Well, it's free, so it's probably instant."

"...Instant?"

"You've never had instant coffee?'

Rosalind shook her head a little.

"Jeez..."

Maybe her family was really rich. She was bratty and talked weird, so it was almost like...

“You really are a princess, aren’t you?”

“...!”

“Huh? What’s wrong?”

“N-Nothing!”

Rosalind quickly chowed down on the remainder of her bun and her tart as if something had spooked her and she was itching to get out of this place.

“C-Come on! Let’s go!” she said.

“Hey, wait!”

I hurried after her. When we made it outside, the afternoon sun shone down on us.

“...”

Rosalind stopped in front of the entrance to the store. When I caught up to her and stood next to her, she said my name.

“...Namidare.”

“What’s up?”

“M-My hand...” She looked down and spoke hesitatingly. Her voice was as soft as a mosquito buzzing. “Can you hold my hand?”

Her bangs were covering her face so that I couldn’t really see it, but it seemed to be flushed red.

“You’re always grabbing my arm. Why are you blushing now?”

“Sh-Shut up! This is different!”

I personally found it way more embarrassing when she grabbed my arm... but she probably wouldn’t stop even if I asked her to. She really was a bratty princess.

“Here.” I chuckled and grabbed the tiny hand she offered. “All right, let’s walk around a little more.”

“I-Indeed.”

We walked for a while in the warm sunlight. Since Rosalind was still rejecting my suggestions, we barely went into any other shops. We eventually took a break and sat down on a park bench together. Once our legs had rested up a little, we started walking again despite the fact that we still had no destination in mind.

“This is basically a walk, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. But what’s wrong with that?”

Normally you’d think this was a boring way to spend a weekend, but Rosalind had been smiling practically the whole time. She was still holding my hand and wasn’t letting go. As long as it

didn't bother her, it didn't bother me. This was my hometown, but there were places I didn't know. I was learning things too. But by the time the sun was starting to set, we'd run out of places to visit and headed back to the station.

"Want to call it a day?"

"No."

Ah, yes, the spoiled princess...

"But I can't think of anywhere else to go."

"Then come to my house."

"Huh? No, that's..." I was caught off guard by her sudden request. "It's already dinnertime. Your parents wouldn't want me just showing up, would they?"

I gave her the first excuse that came to mind, but she just hugged me tight and looked up into my eyes.

"It will be just fine."

"No, but..."

"You promised to spend the day with me, didn't you?"

She stood on her toes, stretching to bring her face closer. Her red eyes flashed right in front of mine.

"Yeah... I guess I did..."

That's right. I had to spend the whole day with Rosalind.

.....

.....

.....?

"Huh...?"

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"...No."

Something felt out of place, but when I looked into Rosalind's eyes, it didn't seem to matter anymore. It was like a part of my mind was being painted over in red.

"All right, I guess I will stop by then."

"Good."

I went to follow Rosalind, but suddenly I heard a voice behind me.

"Huh? Is that you, Rekka?"

I turned around and saw a girl I recognized coming up to me.

"Lea."

"It's rare to see you outside of Nozomiya."

The girl in the T-shirt—Lea—walked right up to me.

"Yes, I suppose it is. What are you doing here, Lea?"

“I was helping Tsumiki with her practice. I’m just taking a little walk to help my digestion.”

“You were eating more dark matter, huh?”

I imagined the face of my classmate, the shop girl at the cafeteria, and chuckled as a bead of cold sweat dripped down my face. For Lea, Tsumiki’s cooking was a delicious and extremely efficient energy source, but it could be fatal to normal humans. Lea suddenly turned to Rosalind, who was still holding my hand, and looked at her suspiciously.

“I don’t know her. Is she someone you know?”

“Yeah. This is Rosalind. She just transferred to my school.”

I gave her a brief introduction.

“Another girl…?”

For some reason, Rosalind was glaring at Lea with narrowed eyes.

“Namidare, let’s get going.”

“Huh? Why are you so mad?”

“I’m not mad.”

“No, you’re definitely mad.”

“Shut up! You’re spending the whole day with me! So stop talking to other girls!”

“I was just saying hi!”

I didn’t know why she had to get so mad.

“Rekka, have you really been with her the whole day?”

“That’s right. Why?”

Lea raised an eyebrow in suspicion at my answer.

“Well, I’m not terribly surprised to see that you’ve found another girl to make friends with. But weren’t you supposed to go shopping with Harissa today?”

I didn’t have a clue what she meant.

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“What am I talking about? I ran into Harissa on the shopping street, and she was pretty excited about it.”

Harissa? I was supposed to go shopping with her? What was going on? I tried to think about it, but then there was a painful flash of red light across my field of vision.

“…I really don’t remember. Anyway, I’m heading to Rosalind’s place.”

I quickly ended the conversation and turned to go. I had to.

“Rekka, hang on a second.”

Lea tried to grab my shoulder, but Rosalind got in her way.

"Stop. Don't say anything to Namidare that he doesn't need to hear."

A strange light flashed in her eyes. Lea froze for a moment, but...

"Give back Rekka!" she screamed sharply as she swung at Rosalind with the back of her hand.

"Tch!"

With speed you wouldn't expect from her young appearance, Rosalind dodged the attack. In an instant, their positions had switched. Lea was now in front of me, standing between me and Rosalind.

"Lea..." I was still dizzy, but I called her name in a frail voice.

"Rekka, get a hold of yourself. You're being controlled."

"Controlled, huh...?"

I wasn't sure how to respond to that declaration. Normally if somebody literally said to you, "You are being controlled," your reaction would be to laugh it off. But my bloodline put me in all kinds of weird situations, and this was no laughing matter.

"I think it's a charm. It's a special power possessed by certain ancient clans that enables the user to control someone through the power of their eyes. You can't dispel it, which makes it hard to get rid of, but a strong mind can break through it."

"...Ugh..."

When she started talking about this mysterious "charm" power, I suddenly felt dizzy again. Why had I just told myself that I *had* to go to Rosalind's house? Was I the kind of guy who liked going home with girls he barely knew? Wait... Yes, I was. That's why I needed to go to Rosalind's house—

There it was again! It was like my thoughts were forced to go in a certain direction. Now that Lea had said something, I realized how unnatural it was.

"Hmph. So you broke my charm... And on top of that, you seem to know who I am."

"I've been around for a lot longer than you might think."

As Rosalind and Lea glared at each other, I was struggling against the charm that had been cast on me. Thanks to Lea, I knew that I was being controlled, but I still couldn't shake the thought that I had to spend the day with Rosalind. My mind was being made up for me. That was the power of the charm.

To make matters worse, it seemed like the charm had the ability to affect my memory in order to make these forced thoughts more believable. Lea had said that I'd promised to go shopping with Harissa today, but I couldn't remember that at all. No, I couldn't even try and remember it. It was like the charm was driving anything out of my mind that might stop me from following my order.

Wait. Hang on. If Lea was right, that meant that I'd forgotten my promise to Harissa because of this charm. But what about Harissa? When I'd left the house this morning, she'd waved to me as I went out the front door. If I'd promised to go shopping with her, how come she hadn't said anything? Had Rosalind done something to Harissa too?!

"Gwaaah!"

Something snapped in my mind. The red fog creeping into my vision faded, and my head was finally clear.

"Rosalind. What did you do to Harissa?"

"Hmph. So my charm's truly been broken..."

"Answer my question! It's not just Harissa, is it? You did something to Satsuki and Iris too, didn't you?!"

"Something? You're not very bright, are you? I did the same thing to them that I did to you."

Which meant that Rosalind was controlling them too.

"...What do you want from me so badly that you're willing to do all this?"

My memories were coming back, and I remembered the conversation I had with Hibiki too.

"I'll see you at 5:00 P.M. tomorrow."

I looked at the station clock. It was almost five.

"R-Rekka! What's all this fuss?"

Right on time, Hibiki came out of the station, along with a girl that I didn't know. She quickly ran towards us.

"Fuss...?"

Only then did I realize that everyone was staring at us. I guess even in a small station like this, a sudden argument would attract attention. And of course, most stations had a police box in front of them...

"Hey, you kids! What are you doing?"

"Are you okay? Come over here."

Two officers came running over. One of them gently put his

hand on Rosalind's shoulder and tried to lead her away from us. Given how young she looked, it was a given that the policemen were concerned about her, but...

"How dare you touch me?!"

"?!"

I felt a sudden gale rush around her and reflexively covered my face with both arms. There was a powerful sensation of pressure, I guess you could call it. It was different than the murderous auras I'd felt before... It was a presence—a powerful one—like an invisible force emanating from the tiny girl before me.

"Hmph. So Lea, Namidare, and one other are all still standing, huh?"

Me. Lea. Hibiki. Other than the three of us, everyone else in the plaza had passed out. There had been people waiting for taxis, but fortunately there weren't any cars passing by. This would have caused a serious accident.

"Tch... Hey, Chelsea. Wake up."

Even the girl who'd arrived with Hibiki had collapsed. I assumed it was the girl she'd mentioned over the phone. Hibiki was now holding her and trying to get her to regain consciousness.

"Sorry. I was supposed to talk to you about your story, but it looks like I got you caught up in mine."

"Yeah, I guess so. But if the blond girl is your enemy, who's your heroine this time?"

"..."

Come to think of it... who was it? I'd only realized after talking to Hibiki yesterday that this was all some kind of sign that I was about to get dragged into a story. Rosalind had used her charm on me immediately after that, so I hadn't had the chance to ask R if she was a heroine.

It wasn't obvious yesterday, but at this point it was clear that Rosalind wanted to harm me. So in manga or light novel terms, she was clearly the bad guy. But then who was the heroine? I looked at R.

"Oh, what you're caught up in right now is Rosalind's story," the girl from the future said in her usual monotone voice.

Wait... Was R seriously trying to tell me that I was supposed to save a "heroine" who was actually my enemy? All signs seemed to be pointing to yes.

"Rosalind... Please just tell me what you're after."

I was hoping she would answer me if I asked again. But my enemy—the heroine of this story—just narrowed her red eyes and twisted her lips.

"What I'm after? That's simple... I want revenge on the one called Namidare who sealed me away and sank me into the sea one hundred years ago."

I could feel the hatred in her words as she spoke.

"You're nowhere close to a hundred years old. Shouldn't you be dead if you were?"

"I'm a vampire, you see," Rosalind said, casually revealing her true identity.

"...A vampire? I thought you couldn't stand to be in the sun."

Hibiki lightly shook her head and said, "Vampires are said to have any number of weaknesses, but not all vampires are weak to the same things. Powerful vampires in particular have very few weaknesses..."

"Correct. Sunlight, flowing water, crosses, garlic... None of that works on me."

Rosalind laughed. When she did, I could see sharp canine teeth that I hadn't noticed before now. She'd probably been hiding her identity all along.

"I'm going to suck your blood and turn you into a vampire, Namidare." She stopped laughing and glared at me. "I'm going to take everything away from you. Even your humanity. You'll spend an eternity in despair... as my plaything."

A shiver ran up my spine. I could tell from her voice that she was serious.

"Then the reason you transferred to our school and got close to me was..."

"Of course. It was to figure out what was most important to you."

That's why she went after Satsuki and the others?!

I gritted my teeth, both in rage and regret. Rosalind was, without a doubt, my enemy. But she was also a heroine who wanted to take everything from me and then turn me into a vampire. That was the last thing I wanted.

My heart was overcome with bitter rage, but my head was spinning in confusion. The bloodline of the Namidare drew me into stories that were on the verge of a bad ending without my help. Rosalind's goal was to get some kind of revenge by turning me into

a vampire... Yeah, okay. I can see how she would need me specifically for that if I was the one she was after.

But if she failed, how was that a bad ending? It seemed to me like her life would go on the same way whether she got her revenge or not. But she was a vampire...

I still didn't understand Rosalind's "story" fully at this point. Was there something deeper going on? Was there something else she needed? Something that would make her despair of even life itself if she couldn't get it?

But, of course, if the stand-in hero (read: me) got taken out before I could learn what was going on, I couldn't help her either way. First, I needed to get through this, cure the girls, and figure out what the heck was up with this story.

"I won't let you turn Rekka into a vampire."

Lea was the first one to take action. As she spoke, the moisture in the air around us began to condense, forming a ball of water in front of her. It was her signature water magic.

"Hmph. You're nothing," Rosalind scoffed, readying herself for battle as well.

Hibiki and I both tensed up too.

"I'll destroy you!" Lea yelled as she launched a ball of water the size of a softball.

Rosalind ducked down to dodge it, but just as it was about to pass over her head, it exploded, soaking her dress and blond hair.

"...I just told you that running water wouldn't work on me." Rosalind's wet face twisted with anger.

"I just wanted to see for myself," Lea said unfazed.

"I don't enjoy having my clothes ruined for such a stupid reason!"

Now it was Rosalind's turn. She closed the gap between them in an instant.

Bam!

There was a horrific noise as Lea blocked the vampire's punch with the palm of her hand.

"Oh, you decided to block it?"

Rosalind was unimpressed. She struck again, and then again. Lea successfully blocked each of her blows, but it was all I could do to follow their movements. And what the hell was all that noise?! It sounded like someone was slamming a hammer into a metal sheet!

"Damn it!" I yelled.

I wanted to help, but this fight was on a whole other level. Not even Hibiki looked like she could do anything.

Boom!

There was a noise even louder than the ones before as Rosalind fell backwards with her arms crossed in front of her.

"Even a tiny vampire is still a vampire, huh?" Lea whispered to herself as she lowered the leg she'd just used for a kick. There was a single cut on her cheek. Blood trickled down her jaw before dripping to the ground.

"Lea!"

"It's just a scratch."

She wiped her cheek as I ran over to her, as if telling me not to worry. Lea was once known as The Strongest Beast, but she'd lost almost all of her power. She could eat Tsumiki's dark matter to regain her strength temporarily, but even then it didn't bring her close to her former glory. Did that make her weaker than Rosalind right now...?

"Mmm... Delicious." Rosalind licked the blood off her hand. "And this taste... With that body, don't tell me you're still a pure maiden?"

"I was locked away all alone for a very long time."

"Hibiki," I asked, "what's a 'pure maiden'?"

"Wh—?! D-Don't ask me that! Look it up yourself!"

Hibiki seemed to know the answer, but refused to tell me.

"But it was Rekka here who broke the seal that bound me," Lea said proudly. She smiled, and she briefly glanced over at me. "If I was going to cease being a pure maiden, I'd like it to be at Rekka's hands."

Both Rosalind and Hibiki looked shocked. Their faces turned bright red. What was this 'pure maiden' stuff about, anyway? Was it something I could help Lea with?

"Lea's quite the free spirit, huh? If only she was a little more aggressive..."

Even R seemed to know what Lea was talking about. I guess I really was the only one left out. Nevertheless, Lea's mysterious (at least to me) comment had stopped the battle for a moment, but...

"Gah! This is so stupid! Let's just finish this fight already!" Rosalind yelled. The very air around her seem to shake.

"...If I'd known this was coming, I would've eaten more of Tsumiki's cooking," Lea whispered as she dropped into a crouching

stance.

"Tch...!"

I readied my hands into fists, and Hibiki moved in front of Chelsea. But then... Rosalind's body suddenly exploded into red fog.

"What the hell?!"

The red fog swallowed all of us, effectively blinding us.

"Is this her special power as a vampire?!"

I could hear Hibiki, but I couldn't see her.

"...Gah!"

Next, I heard a low scream followed by the sound of someone collapsing. The red fog then converged on a single spot as if it had a mind of its own. When it cleared, Rosalind reappeared. A downed Lea was lying at her feet.

"Lea! Damn it!"

"Don't move."

I started to leap forward, but Rosalind reached out a hand that appeared to transform into two red and black wolves. Damn! Could she just do anything she wanted? By the time I realized that this was another one of her vampire powers, both Hibiki and I had been knocked to the ground by the wolves.

"You've wasted a great deal of my time," Rosalind said.

"Gaagh...!"

Even in her weakened state, she had to be incredibly powerful in order to go toe-to-toe with Lea like that. And on top of that, she had all her special abilities. Was this the true power of a vampire?

"Now, let's start with the most troublesome one..."

Rosalind reached down with her other arm and grabbed Lea by her hair. She lifted her head up so that they were face-to-face. Then her red eyes flashed. It was her charm magic. Lea had resisted it earlier with her strong will, but what would happen when she was unconscious?

"You are my ally. You want to do anything you can for me. And you won't listen to anyone but me."

"Hnn... Hnngh..."

Slowly Lea stood up.

"Lea!"

"..."

But she didn't answer me. At least the "won't listen to anyone" part of the charm must have been in effect.

Rosalind giggled when she saw her.

“You… What are you trying to do by controlling Lea?”

“I told you, didn’t I? I’m going to take everything from you.” She looked down at me, practically expressionless. “This time, I’ll cast a more powerful charm on you. One so powerful you won’t even notice if everyone you care about disappears. Then when you’ve lost everything, I’ll be there to comfort you… And once you can’t live without me, I’ll tell you the truth.”

“No way! I would never just forget about everyone!”

“Give up now. There’s nothing for you to do but become mine, Namidare.”

Rosalind reached her hand out towards my face.

“I won’t… I won’t give up!”

I focused my mind to resist the charm, desperately trying to think of some way out of this. It was in just that moment that I saw out of the corner of my eye someone leaping towards us from the top of the station building. They were aiming straight for Rosalind’s back!

“What?!”

It was a surprise attack from her blind spot, but Rosalind must have sensed it somehow. She quickly tried to turn the wolves back into her arm and turn around, but it was too late. A sharp knife was sticking out of her left shoulder.

“Gwaah!”

With a scream, Rosalind tried to back away from the mysterious attacker. It was only then that I got a good look at our surprise ally. It was a girl with long, unkempt, dirty silver hair. She was staring at Rosalind, but there was no suggestion of an expression on her face. She didn’t even speak.

“…”

Her long, silver hair was moving about on its own in defiance of gravity. The ends of her hair wove themselves together, forming countless rows of silver knives. So she wasn’t human either?! As I watched in shock, the mysterious girl charged at Rosalind.

“Lea, protect me!”

“Understood.”

In response to Rosalind’s order, Lea slammed into the silver-haired girl from the side.

“…”

Still without saying a word, she turned her silver hair into something like a shield—probably using the same method she’d used to make the knives a moment ago—and jumped back away from Rosalind.

Rosalind’s summoned wolves turned to fog and reformed as her arm again. That gave us some breathing room. With the wolves gone, we were able to get up now.

Me and Hibiki. The silver-haired attacker. Rosalind and Lea. A strange triangle was forming between the lot of us.

“Silver Slayer… You’re still alive?”

“Affirmative.”

The mysterious attacker—Silver Slayer—seemed to know Rosalind.

“You’re always so unfriendly. And always so persistent.”

“I was created to defeat you. It is inevitable that I will follow you until I do so, vampire.”

“Hmph. You’re the slave doll of an alchemist. Nothing more,” Rosalind said angrily as she clutched the still-bleeding wound on her shoulder. “Tch. Silver wounds heal so slowly… We’re leaving, Lea.”

Rosalind leaped up with surprising force and landed far, far away.

“Wait! Lea!”

“…”

Lea completely ignored me and followed after the vampire. They were gone before we knew it. Now it was just me, Hibiki, the still-unconscious Chelsea, and the strange girl that Rosalind had called Silver Slayer.

Interlude: 50 Years Ago

Somewhere on the bottom of the ocean.

"...Mmm..."

A girl woke from a dream.

"..."

She slowly opened her eyes only to be met with the bleak darkness of the ocean floor—a blackness so deep that even the eyes of a vampire could barely pierce it. And without moving a muscle, the girl—the vampire Rosalind C. Bathory—stared into the void. She still seemed to be in a dream.

How long had it been since she was sealed in this coffin and sunk to the bottom of the sea? She'd counted the days for the first two or three years. After a decade or so, her mind started to fade in and out.

"..."

Now she was in a state where she didn't know if she was awake or asleep, or even if she was alive or dead. No, she was probably still alive... whatever good that was doing her.

The lifespan of a vampire was incredibly long. Killing one was not an easy task. Even if she wanted to die, there was nothing she could do to take her own life here. And so in the end, she found herself in an abyss of sloth and resignation.

"..."

Her mind eventually gave up on the very idea of the future, and so without being conscious of it, her mind started looking backwards towards the past. Once she gave up on counting the days, it was all she could do to fill her thoughts with pleasant memories from the past. They were like a dream. A radiant dream. It was the one shining light for her down here at the bottom of the black ocean. And the source of that light was always the same thing—a young boy.

"Nami... dare..." Rosalind cried his name as if trying to find him.

In her mind, she was reliving the days she'd spent with him.

The illusion was strong enough to bring a smile to her forlorn lips. But it never lasted. The shimmering, beautiful memories always ended in tragedy. A silver knife in her breast. Namidare's hand on the blade.

"..."

In her dream, she screamed wordlessly. Her expression twisted in pain, and for the first time in a very long time, she moved her body. She stretched her right hand, touching something like a scrap of paper. It was a photograph. A photograph she'd once taken with the boy named Namidare.

In the faded, ripped picture, Rosalind was smiling. But that was just a memory now. All she had left was pain. This photo, a memento from happier days, was her only solace.

"..."

Rosalind closed her eyes once more, clinging to the warm feeling the photograph instilled in her. Deeper and deeper she sank... Deep enough that she wouldn't have to feel the pain anymore.

Chapter 3: Namidare

Night. The Namidare household.

When I got back, Harissa was gone. I went next door to Satsuki's house, but her parents said she'd suddenly gone out too. Rosalind was probably controlling them both. It was safe to assume that Iris was gone too.

As I was trying to figure out what to do about this, Hibiki came back from laying Chelsea down so she could recover.

"Is she okay?" I asked.

"She's just unconscious," Hibiki said. "She'll wake up soon."

"I see."

When this all started, I was supposed to be helping her with her story, but now I'd gotten her caught up in one of my own. I felt pretty guilty.

And then there was the matter of our other guest. The girl who'd ended up saving us—Silver Slayer—was just standing silently by the window, not doing anything in particular.

"Um... Silver Slayer?"

"Yes."

She turned around obediently when I called her name.

"Hibiki's here too now, so do you think you can tell us about Rosalind?"

"Understood."

I had Hibiki and Silver Slayer sit down on the living room sofa, then dragged over a chair from the kitchen so I could sit across from them.

"First, I want to make sure I understand what's going on. I've got several questions for you. Can you answer them?" I asked.

"There is no issue with answering your queries."

"Then first... what do you know about Rosalind?"

"I do not know her personal history. However, I have confirmed that she's a powerful vampire, at least five hundred years old."

Honestly, I was a little disappointed at her answer. If I could find out something about Rosalind's past, I thought, then maybe I

could understand her situation...

"What do you know about her vampire powers?" Hibiki asked.

"This information is primarily based on my combat experience with her, but she has physical capabilities far exceeding a normal human, including exceptional stamina and accelerated healing. She also has the ability to turn into a wolf, a bat, or mist; the ability to supernaturally charm people; and the ability to turn someone into a vampire and make them her thrall by sucking their blood."

"In Bram Stoker's novel, only people who were pure could become a vampire after having their blood drained. Are there any restrictions like that on her power?"

"I believe she's capable of using it on any living creature. I once fought a cow she had turned into a vampire."

"...Hmm, that's tough."

Hibiki gave me a look.

Yeah, I know... Worst-case scenario, she's already turned Satsuki and the others into vampires.

"Next question."

"Proceed."

It was Hibiki's turn to ask Silver Slayer a question again.

"Who are you?"

"..."

"And what were you doing back there at the station? That power you used to turn your hair into knives... In a sense, you're even stranger than she is. It doesn't seem like you're against us, but I'm not sure I'm comfortable working with a total stranger."

"...Organizing non-classified information. Please wait."

Silver Slayer froze for a moment. She was so expressionless that she looked like a doll when she stopped moving. Her almost inhuman beauty only added to the effect.

"In short, I am a homunculus that was made by my master, an alchemist, approximately two hundred years ago."

There was plenty about that sentence that went over my head. What was a homunculus? And wait, two hundred years ago?

"Do you require additional information regarding homunculi?"

"Yeah. Give us the short version. Rekka won't be able to understand the long one."

"Well excuse me!" I yelled, but I couldn't say much else. She was right.

"I shall limit my explanation to the essential data then."

“Please do.”

“Homunculi are artificial life-forms created by a technology called alchemy.”

“...Alchemy?”

“A general term for a set of techniques that involve changing lower orders of matter into higher orders. For example, lead into gold. It was studied widely in Europe many centuries ago.”

“So... we’re talking some ancient, mysterious science?”

“If that explanation works for you, then yes.”

Yes, it does. But you don’t have to look at me with those pitying eyes. It hurts.

Anyway, did that mean that Silver Slayer was an artificial life-form like R? The technology used to make them was pretty different, but that seemed to be the case.

“Hmm... Why did Silver Slayer’s master make her breasts so small? He should’ve been able to make them any size he wanted. Maybe he had a fetish for small boobs?”

One was much less dignified than the other, however.

Hey, wait, your breasts are small too. I guess that’s appropriate for your age, but... Come to think of it, Silver Slayer does look old enough that hers could be a bit bigger, huh? Wait, what am I thinking about?!

“I will continue my explanation. The powers of a homunculus are determined by the wishes and capabilities of its master. The one thing that all homunculi have in common is that they are tools that exist only to carry out the will of their master.”

Something rubbed me the wrong way about how she said “tool.”

“Silver Slayer, you’re acting in accordance with your master’s orders, right?”

“Affirmative.”

“Hmm... If carrying out your orders is why you exist, then you didn’t follow us home from the station out of a sense of duty after saving us, but because you had some other reason?”

“Affirmative. As long as it does not go against my orders, I am allowed independent thought in order to achieve my mission. I judged that following you—Sir Namidare in particular—would prove extremely beneficial in completing my objective.”

“M-Me?”

I would be useful in completing her objective? Did that mean...

“Yup. Silver Slayer’s another of your heroines,” R said in answer to my confused glance, swinging her legs in the air as she spoke.

“I figured it was either me or Rekka, but since Rosalind said she wanted revenge on Namidare, I guess it makes more sense that it’s him,” said Hibiki, not looking especially surprised.

Wait a second... Did Silver Slayer want me to do the same thing one of my ancestors had?

“Then your goal is...”

“My master’s order is the annihilation of the vampire Rosalind C. Bathory,” Silver Slayer said in a cold, calm voice.

▽

Silver Slayer was planning to murder Rosalind. If that happened, I couldn’t save Rosalind’s story. But if it didn’t happen, I couldn’t save Silver Slayer’s story. So not only was a heroine my enemy, but two heroines were fighting each other? As I considered how to deal with a problem that was more complicated than any I’d faced before, the door to the living room suddenly opened.

“Hibiki, are you there?”

“Chelsea, are you okay to be up and about?”

“Yeah.”

It was Chelsea, the girl who’d come with Hibiki to visit me today.

“I didn’t get a good look at her at the station, but she’s got an impressive figure. Especially her breasts.”

Why was R so obsessed with boobs?! I mean, sure, there was quite a bit of cleavage visible underneath her tank top, but still...

Hibiki explained the situation so far to Chelsea as I sat there blushing.

“I see. That’s a pretty nasty situation, huh?” Chelsea sighed and shrugged her shoulders.

“Sorry for getting you caught up in all this,” I apologized.

“Nah. When you’re a treasure hunter, you get caught up in all kinds of messes.” Chelsea gave me a wink and a grin. “What’s happened so far isn’t important. What matters is how we decide to handle it now, right? I’m in a tight spot, so I need your friend Satsuki and her precise divination magic.”

“You’re looking for some demon pot that grants wishes, right?”

“That’s right. I need to cure my sick little brother.”

Despite the incredible things going on around her, Chelsea was still acting pretty casually. As bad as things were, her optimistic attitude was a big help for me.

“Okay. Then first, we need to save the others.”

Moving forward. That was the first step towards bringing these stories to a happy ending. I wasn’t going to accomplish anything just sitting here.

“Wait, Rekka.”

“Gwah!”

But before I could go save anyone, Hibiki grabbed me by the collar.

“I agree that we need to save them, but do you know where Rosalind is right now?”

“Uh… Maybe we could check places a vampire might like to hang out?”

“And where do you think a vampire would hang out?”

“Um… Caves? Maybe a church?”

“Hahh… Rekka, you don’t like to think things through, do you?” Hibiki sighed.

“No, I mean, I am putting some thought into this, you know? She’s after me to the point that she transferred into my school, so she can’t be that far away.”

“Sure, I’ll give you that. But there’s someone here who can do a better job than you, right?” Hibiki looked at Silver Slayer as she spoke.

“If you’re looking for the vampire, I can track her by her aura.”

“Really?!” I yelled in surprise.

“Affirmative. Granted, the only vampire I can do this for is Rosalind.”

“That’s more than enough!”

“She’s been tracking Rosalind for years. Of course she’d have a way to find her.” Hibiki sighed again.

“Then next, we need to find a way to save your friends,” Chelsea said.

“Silver Slayer’s attacks are effective against her, right?”

“The vampire is immune to the sun, running water, crosses, and garlic, but silver is her one weakness.”

As she spoke, Silver Slayer raised a hand… then turned her fingers into knives.

“If a vampire is injured by silver, it strikes at their life force, not just their physical body. I am made of alchemical silver formed around a philosopher’s stone core. I can change my shape at will. That is where my name, Silver Slayer the Vampire Killer, comes from.”

So her whole body was an anti-vampire weapon, huh? I guess her master really did make her only with killing Rosalind in mind...

She was made for that reason. She fought for that reason. If she actually defeated Rosalind, would that really make her happy?

“If silver is an effective weapon, I’d like to have some of our own to protect ourselves.”

“Then I will use part of my body to make weapons for you.”

“Thanks. I’d like a knife. What about you, Chelsea?”

“I’d like a knife too. Not that I’ve ever used one for anything other than fileting fish while camping...”

“I see. What about you, Rekka?”

“I’m not really good with weapons and stuff... I’d just like something I can use to help everyone.”

And so began our preparations to take back Lea and the other girls.

▽

The vampire lair that Silver Slayer led us to was a surprisingly familiar place, but it was very different from the last time I saw it. It was the hill with the abandoned factory where Satsuki had met me on the first day of school. However...

“What’s with this huge mansion?” I asked, baffled.

“This is your hometown, right? You don’t know it?” Hibiki asked somewhat skeptically.

Hell no. A month ago, there was just some rundown factory here. I mean, sure, it did get blown up a little, but there was certainly never a gigantic mansion here.

“It’s probably that ‘vampire’ thing’s doing, right?”

Chelsea looked up at the giant building. “Wow,” she whispered to herself, “what a mansion.”

“Well, the building itself seems normal enough. I guess it doesn’t matter who made it.”

“That’s right. Let’s just forget about that part. That’s not what’s important here.”

Hibiki and I nodded to each other, ready to get down to business.

“Silver Slayer, Rosalind’s inside, right?”

“Affirmative.”

“All right, then let’s go...”

We opened the door to the oversized house and went inside. It was dark. Even though it was nighttime, the only source of light was coming from the candles on the walls.

“Well, this place sure has atmosphere going for it...” I whispered to no one in particular.

The four of us proceeded deeper into the mansion, staying together as much as possible. There was a short hallway past the front door which lead to another door. Only after opening that second door were you finally in the front hall. Two long hallways split off from there, each with seemingly countless doors. And in the center of the hall right in front of us was a huge staircase that ten people could easily go up and down at once.

“Which way do we go?” Hibiki asked.

“I propose we go to the second floor,” Silver Slayer said.

“Why?”

“The vampire likes high places.”

Come to think of it, she did always insist on eating lunch on the roof at school.

In the end, Silver Slayer knew Rosalind better than any of us, so we decided to go with her plan. We headed straight for the staircase leading up. But...

“Above us!” Hibiki suddenly cried out.

Just after she screamed, someone jumped down from the second floor to block our path and attack us. My eyes went wide when I saw who it was.

“Iris!”

“.....”

She didn’t answer me. It looked like she was under the same charm spell Lea was. And then Lea herself appeared on the landing.

“Lea!”

“I will stop you.”

She too ignored me, glaring as she descended the stairs. I could feel the animosity radiating from her. But it wasn’t my chief concern in that exact moment.

“Why are the two of them in maid uniforms?!”

“The vampire likes them.”

She likes maid uniforms? I mean, I guess that’s what servants wear, but to a normal Japanese person like me, it just looked like cosplay.

“Wait, now’s not the time to be worried about that!”

Regardless of how they looked, this was a bad situation. The two of them were standing in front of the stairs now, preventing us from going forward. I didn’t want to hurt them, but beating them seemed like the only way we would get upstairs.

“Yah!”

Iris leaped toward us with terrifying speed. The attack was so violent that when she landed, her jump kick smashed through the floor. I managed to dodge it at the last second, but a piece of the splintered wood flew up and embedded itself in my cheek.

“The floor’s made of wood, but there’s just bare earth below it! What’s going on here?!” Hibiki yelled. She’d only managed to dodge at the last moment too.

“Don’t ask me!” I yelled back.

It’s not my fault Fineritans are so strong!

“I defer to Sir Namidare for instructions. I believe that I could neutralize them both by force,” Silver Slayer ran up to my side and whispered in my ear.

I was a little surprised. Eliminating Rosalind was her top priority, and I was pretty sure she’d get rid of any obstacles in her way without a second thought.

“The structure of my body means that it’s impossible for a vampire to defeat me, but over the last two hundred years, I’ve failed to defeat her even once. Thus, I have placed my hopes in you, the descendant of the Namidare who sealed her away. I cannot jeopardize my alliance with you here.”

So that was it, huh? It made sense, but that put me under a ton of pressure.

“Then just do your best not to hurt them. But if you have to protect yourself, then you have to protect yourself.”

“Understood.”

She nodded, then transformed her hair into a lasso like cowboys used to wrangle horses. Evidently she intended to capture them without hurting them. But even if Iris wasn’t a professional fighter, she was still as quick as a cat. Even Silver Slayer would have trouble catching her.

“Rekka! Move!” Hibiki suddenly shouted.

“Hm? Dwaah!”

When I heard her yell, I twisted my body just in time to avoid something passing by me at an incredible speed. Was it a bullet? Of water? That’s right, Lea’s magic!

“Chelsea, you can use magic too, right? Can’t you cast some sort of defense spell or something?!”

“Sorry for being a failure of a mage!”

A good distance away from me, Hibiki and Chelsea were arguing as they dodged the rain of water bullets.

“……”

Lea was standing in front of the staircase, silently firing one round after another. She was aiming mostly at Silver Slayer, who was trying to catch Iris, while keeping an eye on Hibiki and Chelsea. I was the least useful in combat, so I was largely being ignored. But since there was no place to hide in the big, open hallway, there was no way I could catch her off guard.

Damn it! Wasn't there something I could do? ...Think! What were we really dealing with here?

Our biggest problem right now was Lea and Iris. They were being controlled by Rosalind's charm. So... how were we supposed to break it? Lea told me that it was possible if a person's mind was strong enough. And in fact, I'd been able to do it myself.

Back then I'd... That's right! At the time, I wasn't just worried about myself. I was really upset and was thinking about Harissa and the others. That's how I'd managed to shake off the spell. Did that mean the key was strong emotions?

As I was thinking about how to replicate that, I felt a sudden force like something running into me and I was knocked to the ground.

"Grrrowl!"

A wolf?! No, two of them.

Had they been hiding outside the light of the candles? The wolves bit into my clothes and started to drag me towards the staircase. Lea ignored the wolves as I was carried upstairs. I tried to escape, but I was being dragged by my arms, which made it hard to get a grip on the ground or anything else to stop them.

"Rekka!"

Hibiki and the others shouted after me, but Iris and Lea blocked their path to keep them from following.

"Yeowch! Oww! Hey! Oww!"

The stairs! Were banging! Into my head! At a really! Bad! Angle!

SLAM!

Uh-oh...

▽

When I woke up, I was lying on a bed.

"Ugh... That left a bump."

I touched the back of my head and immediately felt a sharp pain. I'd hit my head and passed out... but it didn't feel like much time had passed.

"Where am I?"

I assumed I was still somewhere in the mansion, but where?

"Grrrowl..."

"Uwah!"

Th-That scared me...

There was a wolf snarling in front of the door that seemed like the room's entrance. It was probably watching to make sure I didn't escape. I fearfully stood up from the bed, but the wolf by the door didn't move.

There was another door in the room, but it didn't look like it led to the hallway. Of the two doors, it made sense that the wolf would be guarding the way out.

Hmm... What should I do? I ran my hand over the inner pocket of my jacket to make sure its contents were safe.

Good. It wasn't broken.

I thought it might've shattered when I was dragged up the stairs, but it had managed to survive since I was dragged on my back. If I used it now, I could probably at least blind the wolf. I would be able to get out of the room, but could I get to the other girls? No. Rosalind could summon at least two wolves. Even if I got past this one, there was a good chance the other would catch me and drag me back.

And where was Rosalind, anyway? I couldn't do much until I had some idea of what she was up to.

Just as I was thinking I should wait it out a little longer and see how things went, I noticed a photo stand on top of a chest of drawers.

I stood up and walked over to it. The wolf didn't attack me. It looked like it was just keeping watch to make sure I didn't leave the room.

I reached the chest and picked up the picture. It was an old sepia photograph that looked like it might fall apart if you touched it the wrong way. It was even ripped down the middle. Because of that, I couldn't see the face of the boy in the center. But I could, however, make out the face of the girl next to him. It was Rosalind, wearing the same dress.

"She's smiling..."

It was the happy, shy smile I'd seen several times at school and even earlier this afternoon. She was smiling like a normal girl.

"This was taken in Japan, wasn't it?"

I took a hint from the store sign in the background that was written in Japanese.

"When did photography like this first come to Japan again?"

Satsuki would be the best person to ask about that. Too bad I

still didn't know where in the building she was.

"Satsuki... Uwah!"

Suddenly Satsuki was standing next to me, also wearing a maid uniform.

"Um..."

Maid Satsuki, or really any kind of cosplaying Satsuki, was incredibly rare... I didn't even know what to say. Wait, no! This was not the time to be thinking about how Satsuki looked in her maid outfit!

"Cute, isn't she? There's a big difference between this and how she usually looks. I like it," R volunteered without being asked.

I already said this wasn't the time! Drop it, will you?!

"....."

But Satsuki didn't have any reaction to me. In fact, she ignored me and walked to the back of the room. For some reason, she was holding a bath towel.

"H-Hey, Satsuki!"

Without thinking, I went to follow her. Before I could catch up, I heard the door in the back of the room open, and a fully naked Rosalind emerged.

"Nghwaaah?!"

"Oh, you're already awake? Wait, what are you doing?"

"What are YOU doing?" I quickly turned away.

"I was taking a shower."

That would explain why her blond hair was slick and glistening as it stuck to her chest... Wait, I'd only seen her for a second. How did I remember the sight so clearly?

"What am I thinking? She's just a kid!"

"Who are you calling a kid?!"

She kicked me in the behind and sent me flying back onto the bed, but my heart was still pounding.

She's a kid. A kid! She may actually be five hundred years old, but she still looks like a kid. I kept repeating that to myself until Satsuki was done wiping down Rosalind's body and dressing her.

Back on topic...

"Whew..."

Rosalind, who was now wearing an outfit with a very vampire-esque cape, sat down in an easy chair. Satsuki silently stood behind her. The wolf at the door walked over to its master and melded back into her arm. Rosalind was glaring at me. Maybe she was still

mad about earlier.

"Don't you have something to say to me?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry."

"Hah!" She laughed when I apologized. "You don't seem nearly as concerned as you should be. You've been separated from your companions, and now you're my prisoner."

"...Where are the others?" I asked.

"Who can say?" she replied. She seemed to be enjoying my responses.

Silver Slayer was with them, and Hibiki always knew when it was time to retreat... But all I could do was pray for them. I was worried, but for now, I had to put my faith in them. I would just have to make do for myself in the meantime.

"Rosalind, there's something I want to ask you."

"What?"

"...What happened between you and my ancestor?"

The smile immediately vanished from her face.

"You don't think I'd enjoy telling you that story, do you?"

"Even if they were a relative of mine, I'm getting caught up in all of this because of someone I've never even met. Surely you can understand why I at least want to know what's going on."

Rosalind and I glared at each other for a while.

Maybe it was dangerous to anger her right now, but if I wanted to know her past—her story—this was probably the best chance I was going to get.

"I told you before. About a century ago, things in Europe were getting dangerous, so I left and came to Japan, where your ancestor then sealed me away."

"But that doesn't really tell me anything. Why did my ancestor do that?"

"Because of the bloodline of the Namidare, of course," Rosalind scoffed. She paused for a moment and then continued bitterly, "He got involved in the story of a girl whose blood I tried to suck. He became my opponent... then thrust a silver blade into my heart, and when I was on death's door, he stuffed me into a coffin and threw me in the sea."

A girl attacked by a vampire? If an ancestor of mine ended up in a situation like that, it was true that he'd probably try to protect her from Rosalind. But... something seemed wrong.

"Rosalind, from what you just said, you know about my family

bloodline."

"What of it?" she said.

"Who told you about it?"

It was a possible that a vampire—a being whose very existence defied the rules of nature—simply knew about my bloodline from the very beginning.

"..."

But all that came back was silence. "I knew about it all along" was NOT what she said. Which meant that somebody had told her about it. But who?

"Am I wrong, or did you hear about my bloodline from my ancestor?"

"...Why do you think that?"

"Because there's nobody else who would have known about it and could have told you."

It wasn't something we openly went around talking to people about, so what made him tell her? And what was up with that photograph? It was a photograph from Japan of a boy whose face I couldn't see, along with a smiling Rosalind. If nothing else, they seemed close.

Why did my ancestor tell Rosalind about the bloodline of the Namidare? And who was the boy she was so friendly with? When I connected the dots...

"Rosalind, you were close with my ancestor, weren't you?"

"...!"

I got a reaction this time. That was enough for me to be sure.

"Rosa—"

"Be quiet!" A sharp yell cut me off before I could ask anything else. Her eyes were filled with anger. "There's no need to tell you anything else. You won't be able to even think soon..."

Two red lights appeared in the dim room. Was she going to use her charm on me again? Of course, I wanted to avoid that if I could. If I used the thing in my pocket, I might be able to get away, but I couldn't get this close to Satsuki and then just leave her.

I tried to crawl away from her on the bed. But with the layout of the room, I was trapped like a rat. Rosalind knew it too. She stood up and slowly walked towards me. She was just two meters away. There was no time. If I wanted to escape, I needed to break Satsuki's charm.

Even if she'd been told not to listen to me, she still had to be

hearing my voice. So if I could say something to emotionally agitate her, I could probably break the spell! But what would make her mad...? Wait, did she have to get mad? I didn't know.

One meter.

I didn't have time to think about it!

"Satsuki! I happened to see your aunt hanging laundry out to dry on the veranda!"

It didn't matter what! I just needed to say the first thing that came to my mind!

"And I've gotta say... I really don't know about a teenage girl wearing panties with kittens on them!"

Never in my life, before or after this moment, would I say something I regretted quite so much.

For a moment, everyone in the room was silent. Even Rosalind froze, not believing what she'd just heard.

And finally...

"Wh-Why the heck were you looking at them?! You pervert!" Satsuki's face went beet red.

I had hoped that embarrassing her would be just as effective as making her mad, but had I managed to make her more mad than embarrassed anyway? Like, really, really mad...

Whatever! All that mattered was that the spell over Satsuki was broken.

"Grr... So that's how you broke the spell?" Rosalind's gaze shifted from me to Satsuki.

The moment she looked away, I slipped my hand inside my jacket pocket and pulled out an egg. Not just any egg, mind you. I'd opened a hole in it to remove the yolk, then replaced it with silver powder that Silver Slayer had made for me.

I used my nails to make a crack in the glue I'd used to seal it shut, then flung it as hard as I could into Rosalind's face. The eggshell broke, dousing her with the silvery powder.

"Gwaaaaah! My eyes!"

Rosalind covered her face with her hand and began to stagger about. The silver powder had burned both eyes.

"Satsuki! We're getting out of here!"

"Huh? R-Right!"

The panic in my voice must've brought her fully back to her senses because she let me take her by the hand as we ran out of the room together. I looked outside one of the windows. We seemed to

be on the third floor.

"There's a staircase in the center. We'll use that."

"No, we'll go out this way," Satsuki said as she opened the window. "We're jumping!"

"Huh?!"

Since we were still holding hands, she pulled me right along with her. I felt a floating sensation in the lower half of my body for a second, but my childhood friend chanted a spell, and both of us landed safely on the ground.

"What next?"

"We get out of here and meet up with Hibiki and the others. Let's run!"

She probably didn't know what was going on, but she was sharp, alert, and doing exactly what I needed to her to. I was silently grateful as I ran down the hill and got out my cell phone. Neither Satsuki nor I were very good at exercise, so our three companions quickly caught up to us.

"Where are Iris and Lea?" I asked when they arrived.

"Just before you called, the two of them started to move really slowly. Silver Slayer lassoed them both," Hibiki informed me.

"Moving slowly?"

Was it because of the powder I threw in Rosalind's eyes? When I asked Silver Slayer—our resident vampire expert—about it, she nodded.

"Then can we break through their brainwashing easily now?"

"Out of all of a vampire's powers, their charm is the one most dependent on the strength of their mind. The reason the spell's power was temporarily disrupted wasn't because of the silver powder, but because she was caught off guard. If you're asking me whether the vampire is still in that vulnerable state, however, my answer is that I'm doubtful."

"I see..." I nodded.

Hibiki looked at Satsuki and then me.

"Did you break Satsuki's charm? How did you do it?"

"It was, um... a coincidence." I could see murder in Satsuki's eyes, so I gave a vague answer.

"I don't really understand... But if there's a way to break the charm, what do we do? Risk going back to free the others too?"

"Hmm..."

"Um..." Satsuki timidly raised her hand. "I'm sorry, my head's a

little fuzzy and I still don't know exactly what I'm doing here."

"Oh, right. I'll explain."

Hibiki took over the job of explaining in order to give me some time to think. I had only that much time to make my decision: go back up to the mansion or retreat?

There was still Iris and Lea, not to mention Harissa, who I hadn't seen yet. If I could break all of their charm spells, that would be the end of my biggest worry. Granted, going back was dangerous.

Just when I was about to make my decision...

"Don't trouble yourself."

"Grrrowl!"

A girl's voice came out of the darkness, followed by the bared fangs of a wolf.

Silver Slayer moved faster than any of us, her silver knife stabbing the wolf right between the eyes. The vampire's familiar fell to the ground without even making a sound.

Another wolf appeared from the shadows behind Silver Slayer, catching her off guard. But she turned her hair into a forest of blades, impaling the wolf. It disappeared in a puff of fog, what was left of its power returning to its master. Its master, of course, was Rosalind. She stood before us now, vicious intentions still gleaming in her eyes.

"I won't let you escape..."

She was moving slowly, yet there was a terrible power in her words.

"Everyone, you may fall back."

Silver Slayer the Vampire Killer seemed neither frightened nor assured as she spoke. It was as if she was simply reporting the best option.

And then the two of them collided. It didn't even take a minute for it to be over.

"Guh..." Rosalind was lying on the ground.

Not even Lea had been able to best this vampire, but Silver Slayer had done it with ease. No... When I thought about it, she'd been moving sluggishly since she reappeared. The cause was obvious. The silver had burned her eyes and she still couldn't see. She'd probably relied on her wolf familiar's nose to lead her here.

"Aah... Ugh..."

And during the fight, even an amateur like me could see that

she was trying to protect her left shoulder—the one Silver Slayer had impaled with a knife during the battle at the station. When I'd seen her in her room, the wound itself had healed over, but the damage must have been deep.

But then... Why had she followed us?

"I feel something strange, vampire. Everything you've done today is a mistake. Your kind are strong and cunning, but not arrogant. And that wound on your shoulder... The old you would've detected my sneak attack and evaded it."

"...Hmph. So what?"

"I'm aware of the possibility that it might be a trap," Silver Slayer said coldly as she looked down at Rosalind.

The vampire chuckled bitterly.

"Your sole purpose is to kill me, and every action you take is to that end. You have no value to this world, except insofar as a means to my demise. So that's just what I'd expect you to say."

"Affirmative. There is nothing you have said that I can deny."

"You're such a boring little creature... And now that you've fulfilled your duty, will you just turn into a real silent, unmoving doll before you rust away?"

"...!"

Rosalind's words sent a shock through me.

"Wait, Rosalind. What do you mean by Silver Slayer rusting away?"

"No more or less than what I said. Her only value—her one and only reason for existing—is to kill me. That means that once I'm dead, there's no reason for her to remain in this world."

Silver Slayer herself had explained that a homunculus was a tool created to carry out its master's wishes, and it had been two hundred-some-odd years since she was created. I didn't know much about alchemists, but if her master was human, he was long since dead. She would never receive another order. And what happens to a tool when nobody uses it anymore? ...The answer was just as Rosalind had said.

"That is my purpose. There is nothing wrong with that," Silver Slayer flatly declared as she transformed her right arm into a huge sword. "I will now execute my Master Order."

She raised the sword high over her head. She would bring the blade down on Rosalind's heart... and bring an end to both herself and her opponent!

“Silver Slayer!” I quickly grabbed her from behind.

“Sir Namidare. What are you doing?”

“Wait, Rosalind. Something’s not right here! Is this really what’s going to make you happy?!”

“Hap… py?”

Silver Slayer tilted her head as if she didn’t understand what that meant.

“Just hang on a second! Both you and Rosalind… I don’t think this is your happy ending!”

I didn’t know if she understood even a tenth of what I was saying. Even though she could have easily shaken me off if she’d wanted to, my desperate efforts to hang on to her delayed her sword strike by several seconds. It was just enough time for Rosalind to make her escape. She suddenly vanished into thin air.

“What?!”

“Huh, what? Why’d she disappear?”

Hibiki dropped into a crouch and looked around cautiously while Chelsea just yelled in confusion.

Silver Slayer’s hair grew out into a big, silver cage that surrounded us. If something was coming, we would know.

“…The vampire’s presence is fading,” Silver Slayer said a moment later, and we all finally relaxed.

“Rekka… What was that back there?”

“I think that was Harissa’s magic.”

Invisibility was a specialty of hers. Rosalind had probably brought her as insurance in case things didn’t go well. We then tried going back to Rosalind’s mansion, but it was to no avail. Iris and Lea weren’t there.

“So she got away, huh?” Hibiki whispered and turned towards me. “Rekka… and Silver Slayer too. I want to hear your opinions on how we should proceed.”

“Opinions?”

“Chelsea and I are going to look for the Demon’s Pot. Will you come with us?”

“No. If you two want to do that, I won’t tell you not to, but I…” I was worried about the three girls Rosalind still had and couldn’t help biting my lip.

“You’re right to be worried. But if she can turn invisible, how are you going to find her now? Do you have any clues?”

“Silver Slayer can track her, and Satsuki’s Magic of Omni… I

mean, her search magic can help too," I answered.

"Rosalind's hurt, but both Lea and Iris are still fine. You can find them with magic, but you can't stop them from attacking you while you can't see them."

"That's true, but..."

I looked to Silver Slayer, but she shook her head. I guess not even she thought she could fight an invisible enemy.

"But if we can find the Demon's Pot..." Hibiki stuck up her index finger so that everyone would pay attention. "If it can really grant any wish, you can get the girls back from Rosalind, or even make Rosalind talk things out with you."

"...I see."

She had a point, as usual. It was much better than my idea of following Rosalind without any idea of how to save Iris, Lea, and Harissa. It would even help us solve Chelsea's story too.

"All right. I'll go with you then. Silver Slayer, are you okay with that?"

"I cannot win if I pursue her right now either. I will obey you."

"Then it's settled," Hibiki said.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Interlude: 100 Years Ago

Somewhere in a church in Japan.

The Namidare boy was standing in front of an injured Rosalind.

In his hand was a silver knife from Europe that he'd gone to great lengths to acquire. It was Rosalind herself who'd once told him that silver was her only weakness. She was so amused at how impressed he was that she could be out in the sun that she'd told him without meaning to. But still, it was hard for a sixteen-year-old boy to get an expensive silver knife like that. Especially while running from a vampire who wasn't affected in the slightest by sunlight or running water.

And even with such a weapon in his hands, a normal human was no match for a vampire. For one thing, she was far, far stronger than he was. Vampires could turn into fog and dodge any attack. They could summon bats and wolves—even control them. Not to mention they could suck someone's blood and make them their slave, instantly ending the fight. But even so, he'd been successful.

He'd used his brain—and legs—and finally managed to defeat her. She couldn't help but be amazed by him, even after he became her enemy. She couldn't help but be drawn to him.

"Namidare..." she called his name, half unconsciously.

Rosalind put her hand on the edge of a long, wooden pew bench and tried to stand up. But her strength failed her. Her arm just spasmed and shook. She couldn't feel her legs either.

Silver steals a vampire's very life force. The wound itself would heal, but the loss of that life energy was potentially fatal. It took far longer to recover than physical stamina, and its loss made her slow and even more vulnerable.

Just when she started to think about lying there and letting the Namidare boy finish her, a girl appeared in the church.

Rosalind's eyes went wide and she gritted her teeth. It was the girl who'd stolen Namidare from her.

"No! Don't come over here!" the Namidare boy screamed to her.

“But I’m worried about you!” she yelled back to him.

The two of them both cared deeply for one another. And when she saw it, something in Rosalind snapped.

“You… You’re the one who…!”

She’d thought her fingers lacked the strength to move, but now she felt them snap through the pew. Her legs began to move once more, too, as she found her will to fight renew.

“It’s your fault…”

“Aah!” The girl screamed and fell to the ground at Rosalind’s gaze.

I was here first!

She pushed her limbs beyond their limits as she flung herself into the air. Her red eyes were fixed on the girl she hated.

You’ll pay for taking Namidare from me!

Until now, Rosalind had always gotten everything she ever wanted. She thought that she always would. That included Namidare. He’d been with her ever since they’d met one year ago. That is… until that girl had appeared.

“He was supposed to be mine forever!”

Just before her fangs reached the girl…

“Rosalind!”

The Namidare boy threw himself between them. Rosalind hesitated for just a moment… but that was what decided everything.

The silver blade slashed through her dress—along with the picture she treasured—and dug into her heart. The silver caused most of her bodily functions to shut down. The only reason she didn’t shut down entirely was that the Namidare boy had stayed his blade at the last second.

But even so, half of her heart was destroyed and her body entered a coma as her mind went dim. Just before everything went black…

“I’m sorry, Princess…”

She heard the boy’s words of apology as she helplessly closed her eyes.

Chapter 4: Past Me and Present Me

According to Satsuki's Magic of Omnipotence, this "Demon's Pot" was in a cave on an island in the Atlantic Ocean with a very long name. Going overseas meant getting luggage ready, getting tickets and passports, and all kinds of other stuff. Chelsea handled all of that for us, but I was pretty sure that the way that she handled it wasn't legal. Her words were something to the effect of, "Treasure hunting isn't exactly a nice business, you know." Satsuki was a little hesitant at first, but in the end, she agreed to it all.

And so we stayed up all night getting ready. We took a plane first thing in the morning, and we landed in a country with a name far too long and complicated for me to even remember. Then it was a long trip on a bus, followed by another bus, then a train, then another bus, then a trolley, and then another train. At that point, I didn't have the faintest idea where we were, but when I asked Chelsea, she said we were heading to the sea. That much made sense, considering we were supposed to be heading to an island.

We traveled through the night, switching from one method of transportation to the next. When we were finally getting close to the port, we ran into a problem. The driver Chelsea had arranged for wasn't waiting at the taxi pickup like they were supposed to be. After getting off the phone with the company, Chelsea bowed her head to us and apologized.

"Hahh... I'm sorry. Looks like it's going to take a while."

"No, it's not your fault, Chelsea."

"We're just fine."

"Sorry about this," Chelsea said, apologizing again before going off in search of somewhere to get us all something to drink.

"...It sure is hot, isn't it?" Satsuki said as she wiped the sweat off her forehead.

It certainly was hotter here than it was in Japan. Even so, Hibiki silently sat down on her bag and closed her eyes. I was impressed with her ability to avoid expending unnecessary energy at times like these.

Huh...?

I suddenly realized that we were missing someone and began to look around.

"Oh..."

I spotted the silver-haired girl in a long coat sitting down at the edge of the waiting area.

"..."

I walked over to her, but Silver Slayer was staring at something intently... or maybe not? Like usual, her expressionless face was hard to read. I followed her gaze to see what she was looking at only to see a flower growing out of a crack in the asphalt.

"Do you like flowers?" I asked.

"Negative. The emotional concept of 'like' is not one I have been loaded with."

"Then why are you staring at it like that?"

"...I don't know."

I raised an eyebrow.

There was something different in her voice just then from when she'd said she "didn't know" about Rosalind's past.

"Do you spend a lot of time looking at flowers like this?" I decided to question her from a different angle.

"I did not at the time I was created. Ever since my master created me, I devoted my full efforts to slaying the vampire."

"Sure."

"But about a century ago, I suddenly lost the ability to track her. Yesterday, I learned that this was because your ancestor sank her to the bottom of the sea."

"You couldn't track her down there?"

"It seems my master did not anticipate her being sent there."

Well, no, probably not.

"I lost my target and had no means of receiving new orders, so I temporarily froze my existing order. Then I wandered the world to see for myself if the vampire was truly dead," Silver Slayer said as if it was nothing special.

"But you couldn't sense her anymore, right?"

"There was always the possibility that she'd learned some method of cloaking herself. Since I hadn't defeated her myself, it was impossible for me to say whether or not she was dead. But I had no idea where to go."

That's right. Weren't vampires supposed to turn to ash when

they died? That would mean that even if she really was dead, there would be no record of it and not even a body to prove it. I had no idea how she thought she'd figure out if someone like that was dead or alive... It would be like trying to find a particular grain of sand in a vast desert.

"I walked a long, long time... Then one day I smelled something sweet."

"Something sweet?"

"It was the smell of a certain flower. I'd smelled it before in my battles with the vampire. Thinking back, it was probably the scent of perfume." Silver Slayer closed her eyes for a few seconds, as if remembering the smell. "When I realized it wasn't coming from the vampire, I went to leave... But then I found myself watching the flower and the bees that were gathering its pollen for several minutes."

"That's..."

Was she sure she didn't like flowers?

"I still don't know why. But after that, I do sometimes stare at the flowers and insects I see along the roadside. Just like this..."

She went back to looking at the flower growing in the asphalt. It had a single green stalk with tiny white blossoms all up and down it. I'd seen it somewhere in Japan before... What was its name again?

"That's right. You were looking out at my yard too, weren't you? Were you looking at the flowers?" I asked.

I was pretty sure the flowers in the yard were carnations. My mom used to take care of them, but now that was Harissa's job.

"When I'm doing this, it's like something... something is inside me." Silver Slayer put her hand up to her chest, as if searching for what that something might be.

Huh...

It had been a hundred years since my ancestor sealed Rosalind away at the bottom of the sea. Even if her body was made of silver, Silver Slayer was capable of feeling the wind or smelling the flowers, and she had the power to think for herself. If she'd gone a whole century without finding the vampire she was made to kill, and if she'd spent that whole time wandering the world, surely it wasn't all that weird that she'd started to develop emotions of her own. Even if she was a homunculus, not a human... No, perhaps it was especially because of that.

“Hey...”

“What is it?”

I paused for a second, considering my words.

“Why did you try to kill Rosalind without a second thought?”

“Because that is my job.”

“Yeah, you told me. But Silver Slayer... don’t you want to know what that ‘something’ inside you is?”

She looked up at me wordlessly.

“Will you tell me what it is, then?” she finally asked.

“I can guess, but I can’t give you all the details.”

“Unclear. Why is that?”

“Because that ‘something’ is your feelings.”

She fell silent for a moment at my answer.

“As I said before, I am not equipped with emotions.”

“You look at flowers and you feel something. You see insects and you think something. That ‘something’ is what we call emotion.”

“...”

“But even if humans see the same flowers or the same insects, everybody feels something different when they do. Some people get sentimental. Some people think they’re pretty. Some people may even think they’re funny. So I don’t know what it is exactly that you felt, but I know that you felt something.”

“Humans...” she whispered as if lost in thought. Then her silver eyes turned towards me once more. “If... I propose a hypothesis. If I were human, would I know what it is that I feel?”

“You don’t have to be human. I think you’re already starting to experience emotion. If you keep living in this world, keep feeling more of it... Someday you might understand for yourself.”

So please don’t throw your life away.

That’s what I thought to myself. I then watched the white flower with her until Chelsea came back with drinks.

▽

There were no ferries from the port to the island where we were headed, so Chelsea hired a local to take us there and bring us back. There was a single abandoned cottage on the island, or so she’d been told, so we’d be spending the night there.

I stood at the prow of the boat, idly watching the sun dip below

the horizon. Part of me was thinking that I was lucky to have this experience. It was like something out of a movie. But mostly my mind was somewhere else.

"Whatcha doin'?"

"...Chelsea?"

Chelsea walked up to me, her boots clopping loudly against the deck, and her hand on her hat to keep the sea wind from blowing it away. It was a hat like you'd see in a foreign country, complete with a feather decoration. Her coat was in a similar style, and it made her look like some kind of modern pirate.

She stood next to me and grinned.

"Oh, I was just inside and happened to see a glum little boy out here all by his lonesome. So I came out to tease you."

"...I'm not trying to look cool or anything."

"That's right. You didn't look very cool at all, honestly."

I almost fell right off the boat. I mean, yeah, I know I'm not a Hollywood star or anything...

"So what's bugging you so badly?" she asked.

"...Do I really look like something's bugging me?"

"Yup. You look like a young teenager about to ask a girl out on his first date." She grinned again as she put her elbows on the railing and leaned over it. "Well, I heard about you and Hibiki, so I can guess what it is that's bothering you. I was just thinking that if you needed to talk to somebody, I'm here for you."

"You like helping other people, huh?" I whispered in surprise.

She poked my forehead and said, "I've got a little brother, you see. I try to look out for little boys like you."

"I see. You're a big sister, huh?"

"That's right!"

She laughed a little, and I sighed and relaxed some.

"I think I'm getting somewhere with Silver Slayer, but I don't know how to save Rosalind," I confessed.

"Rosalind's that vampire girl, right?"

I nodded, but Chelsea frowned.

"You're a weird kid."

"Why?"

"Normal people wouldn't worry about someone who attacked them like that, you know?"

"Didn't you just say you thought you knew what I was worried about?"

“I was thinking you were worried about the homunculus,” she clarified. “And wait, Rosalind was after you, right? What did you do to piss off a vampire? Did you stuff some garlic in her coffin as a prank or something?”

“Nah. This is just a guess, but I think Rosalind was close to my ancestor. But then my ancestor had to fight her to protect a ‘heroine,’ and in the end, he had to seal her away...”

“Hmm... A tragic love story, huh?”

“Huh? A love story?”

“What? You mean it’s not?”

I wasn’t sure how to handle this unexpected question.

“No, from what Rosalind said, she was trying to suck the blood of this ‘heroine,’ and my ancestor was just trying to protect her...”

“Oh, I see. You don’t really know much about this kind of stuff, do you?” Chelsea nodded, satisfied with her knowledge of the situation. “You might think that a vampire just sucks somebody’s blood for food, but that’s not always how it works.”

I tried my hardest to remember what I could about vampires from manga and books.

“Um... They turn the people whose blood they suck into vampires too, right?”

“That’s right. Blood is a symbol of life. And sucking someone’s blood means stealing their life from them. But a powerful vampire like Rosalind doesn’t just steal somebody’s life. She can control it, too.”

“Control it?”

“Yup. Like a puppet. It would take a while to go into the specifics, and I don’t know how much it really matters... But I guess I can just give you the short version. Since their life is under the vampire’s control, the person whose blood has been sucked can’t do anything. They become the perfect slave.”

“But isn’t that the same as the charm spell?”

“Close, but not quite. The charm spell affects a person’s mind, but controlling someone through their blood means having control of their life itself. It doesn’t matter how strong they are mentally.”

The way she was able to recite all this stuff from memory made me think that Chelsea might’ve been from a family of mages or something.

She continued, “Some lesser vampires aren’t strong enough to survive without stealing life force from other people. Those ones are

definitely just sucking blood for food. But someone as powerful as Rosalind doesn't need to do that to stay alive, so she only sucks someone's blood when she wants to create a servant. The thing is, though... Rosalind doesn't seem like the type who goes around creating a bunch of servants, does she?"

"Yeah, that's true."

Rosalind had spent at least five days in my town. If she wanted to create servants to tend to her needs, she could've done that easily by now. But the only people in that mansion other than her were Iris, Satsuki, Harissa, and Lea. Each of them had only been brainwashed with the charm spell, and that was even after I'd found out who she really was.

"Which means that there must have been some reason she was going after this 'heroine,' right? And so what's important in this situation is the relationship between the three of them," Chelsea explained.

"The three of them?" I asked.

"Your ancestor, Rosalind, and the heroine." Chelsea held up her hand and raised a finger for each person she mentioned, three in total. "Your ancestor was close to Rosalind. Rosalind tried to suck the heroine's blood to turn her into a vampire, but your ancestor protected the heroine. That's a love triangle, isn't it?"

She drew a triangle in the air for emphasis.

"A... A love triangle?"

"Yup. That's why I called it a tragic love story. One involving both the human and the inhuman."

"But if she could suck blood or use charm magic to control people, why didn't Rosalind use those powers on my ancestor?"

"Hmm... I can't say for sure. But people fall in love for different reasons. Someone's looks, their heart, their money, or any number of other things... Maybe Rosalind fell in love with a part of him that she couldn't get with her charm magic."

"His heart..."

What Chelsea said—even if most of it was just a guess—explained a lot of the things I'd been wondering about. Rosalind felt betrayed. The person she'd been in love with took her down in order to protect someone else. That was why she hated him enough to go after his descendant. "I'm going to suck your blood and turn you into a vampire. I'm going to take everything away from you. Even your humanity." That's what Rosalind had said to me. And

now I knew why.

The only thing left to figure out was how to save her. I could give myself over to her and let her have her revenge... No, that wasn't a good idea. If I did that, everyone else would kick my butt.

And that aside, there was something else bugging me. If Rosalind wanted to turn me into a vampire, she'd had plenty of chances to do it. When she caught me at the mansion. Our date. When we were eating lunch on the school roof. Even before then, she could've used her vampire powers to ambush me any time she wanted.

But instead, she went through all the trouble of using her charm magic to brainwash my friends and get close to me. She'd said it was to find out what I really cared about, but that was still a roundabout way of going about it. Thinking back on it, it seemed like she was trying to hide her real plans. Did Rosalind have some goal other that revenge? It felt like that might be the key I needed to bring her story to a happy ending... Not that I knew what it was yet.

"Hmm..."

"You're at the age where you have a lot on your mind, huh, Rekka?" Chelsea laughed. "All right, then. I'll show you a magic trick to cheer you up."

"A magic trick?"

"That's right. Close your eyes, would you?"

"Okay...?" I didn't know what was going on, but decided to do as she asked.

"Tree spirits, place this boy within your hollows..." Chelsea mumbled under her breath. "Okay, you can open your eyes now."

"Okay... Uwah!"

There was a skirt! Right in front of my face!

I took a step back in surprise and heard laughter from above.

"Oh wow, you're so cute!" Chelsea, who had suddenly grown to twice her height, patted me on the head.

"Is this your magic trick? This definitely has to be magic! How else could you just suddenly get taller?!"

"Yup, it's magic. You got that part right. But I didn't get taller. You got shorter."

"What?!"

I examined my body, and sure enough, my limbs and torso had gotten smaller. My clothes were the same size as before, so both my

pants and shirt were falling off.

“H-How do I go back?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll change you back now. Here.”

She made a finger gun with one hand, pointed it at my forehead, and said, “Bang.” In an instant, I was back to my normal size.

“Wow, that scared me... What was that? A spell to turn somebody into a kid?”

“Nope. It just takes a meter or so off their height.”

That’s.... I didn’t even know what to say...

“That’s kind of useless.”

“Yup. But it’s the only magic I can use.” Chelsea folded her hands behind her head and looked up at the sky. “Because of that, my family of famous mages treated me very coldly. Neither my brother nor I had much talent. On top of that, he was really sick... We figured there was no point in staying in a family like that, so we both ran away from home. And now we travel the world.”

She was talking about it casually, but I knew that two kids running away from home and living on their own wasn’t as easy as she made it sound.

“It wasn’t really hard on you guys?” I asked.

“I guess it was. But it was also a lot of fun. I figured that even if we didn’t have magic, we could still be happy as long as we had money... And, well, one thing led to another and I ended up becoming a treasure hunter. It was a pretty short-sighted choice, if you ask me.” Chelsea laughed and laughed, but the sound of her laughter grew dry as she shook her head. “I guess this is what I get for living without a care for the future. And for dragging my sick little brother all over the world. I didn’t realize that he was forcing himself to smile through the pain, and eventually he got worse...”

I watched as Chelsea sighed. I got the feeling that she was really holding all of this against herself.

“The doctors told me that no matter how much money I paid them, it wouldn’t help. And now that magic and money won’t work, I’m relying on a miracle from the Demon’s Pot. I’ve gone flitting from one thing to another... and now I’m totally out of options. Sometimes I hate myself for being like this.” She was quiet for a minute, and then she smiled as if she wanted to hide how she was really feeling. “But don’t think too much of it. When I heard about

your and Hibiki's family bloodlines, I thought to myself, 'Wow, things have really gotten that bad for me, huh?' It's just got me a little nervous, so thanks for hearing me out. I'll see you tomorrow."

People with our lineage got caught up in stories that were heading for a bad ending. In other words, without our help—meaning that if Chelsea tried to solve this on her own—her story would be beyond saving no matter what she did. To someone like her, that must have felt like having her own helplessness shoved in her face.

"Wait!" I shouted.

Without even thinking, I grabbed her hand before she could go back to her cabin. She turned around and her blue eyes met mine.

"What?"

"Um..."

Why had she come out here in the first place? To listen to my problems and watch the sun set? Of course not. You couldn't even see the ship's prow from the cabins. She'd come out here looking for me. Wasn't she really the one who wanted someone to listen to her problems?

"I don't think you were just flitting from one thing to another."

"What?"

"You were in a tough spot. You were trying your hardest to figure out what would make both of you happy. You struggled and struggled, and this is how it turned out, right?"

When you hit a wall, the only wrong move is to stop. When she learned she didn't have any talent for magic. When she learned that she couldn't buy her brother's health back. She'd never given up before. She never stopped. She struggled, but she always moved forward.

"Even when you were going from one thing to another, you were never wasting your time. If anybody ever laughs at the way you live, I'll kick their ass."

"...I think I've heard that line somewhere before."

"W-Well, sorry! I just don't have a very good vocabulary."

"There's nothing to apologize for." Chelsea giggled, then grabbed me and held me tight. "What matters is whether you mean it or not. And I can tell that you really do mean it."

"...!"

No, um... I mean, I-I'm glad you feel that way, but your b-breasts... They're pressing up against me... and my heart's beating

really fast?!

"Just keep a poker face, Rekka."

That's impossible! Not that you would understand, R! This is a really delicate issue for teenage boys! I mean, we might try to pretend it's not, but it definitely is!

Her soft body, the tickle of her breath on my ears... My endurance was put to the test until we made landfall.

▽

We reached the island on schedule, but the sun had already set. Since we were all tired from our travels, we decided to spend the night in the abandoned cottage and visit the cave where this "Demon's Pot" supposedly was the next day.

Before we went to sleep, we all gathered on the first floor of the cottage to discuss our plans for tomorrow. Chelsea and Hibiki checked to make sure we had the gear we needed, and Silver Slayer volunteered to lead the party into the cave.

"My body is made of liquid silver, so no matter what kind of traps there are, they won't kill me," she said.

Some of the documents that Chelsea had found on the Demon's Pot suggested that the cave was booby-trapped, so we gladly agreed to her offer and came up with a plan. Silver Slayer would take the lead, Chelsea would disarm any traps we found, Hibiki and I would provide support, and Satsuki would use her magic to gather information on the cave.

I was still concerned about Rosalind, but there'd been no sign of her on the way here. Maybe leaving the country right after we saved Satsuki had paid off. Satsuki told me that Rosalind, Iris, and the others were still in Japan. With her Magic of Omnipotence on our side, we could at least be sure that we wouldn't have to worry about them here.

And with everything settled, we all did one last check on our equipment and went to bed to get a good night's sleep for the next day.

▽

But just an hour or so later, we had a problem.

"My brother's condition has gotten worse?!"

Chelsea got a call from the hospital in Japan, which had

evidently gone to a good deal of trouble to track her down. Apparently her brother's condition was deteriorating. When she hung up, her face was dead pale.

"What... What do I do?" she stammered.

"Calm down, Chelsea," Hibiki said.

"I can't calm down... I... I..." Chelsea suddenly seemed to get an idea. She ran over to Silver Slayer and grabbed her by her jacket. "Silver Slayer! You're a homunculus, right? Made from a philosopher's stone?"

"Affirmative. My master used a philosopher's stone to form my core."

"And did this master of yours ever tell you how to make a philosopher's stone?"

Philosopher's stone? Come to think of it, hadn't Silver Slayer said something about that before?

"Well? Did he?!" Chelsea started to shake Silver Slayer as she shouted.

"Negative. It's true that my body was made with a philosopher's stone, but my master did not give me information on how to make it."

"I see..." The strength drained from Chelsea's hands. But she still didn't give up. "Then... Then...! Can you give me some of your philosopher's stone? Even just a little? Really, just a little would be fine!"

Why was Chelsea suddenly so interested in the philosopher's stone?

Satsuki must have seen that I was confused, because she leaned over and whispered in my ear, "The philosopher's stone is one of alchemy's greatest secrets. It can be used for many things. If the philosopher's stone used to create Silver Slayer is a real one, it could be used to make panacea, an elixir to cure any illness."

She continued to explain that if Silver Slayer was a true homunculus who'd been in operation for two centuries, not only did her philosopher's stone have to be real, it had to be a powerful, highly refined one. It could easily make an elixir to cure Chelsea's brother. But...

"Unfortunately, that is impossible," Silver Slayer said mechanically.

"Are you... absolutely sure?" Chelsea asked again.

"The philosopher's stone is one and yet all. All and yet one. A

single philosopher's stone can serve any function, but it cannot be separated from its purpose. If you were to somehow take the philosopher's stone out from inside me, I would cease to function."

“I see...” Chelsea’s hands finally let go of Silver Slayer’s coat, dropping to her sides lifelessly. “I’m sorry... I’m asking for the impossible, aren’t I?”

“Please don’t let it bother you, Lady Margaret. If you’re willing to wait until after I complete my master’s order, I will freely give you the philosopher’s stone,” Silver Slayer said, almost sounding apologetic.

The room filled with a weighty silence.

If I remembered right, Chelsea had told me her brother had three months to live. I—and probably the rest of us—had assumed that meant we had three whole months. Of course diving into some trap-filled cave to find an ancient treasure wasn’t going to be an easy task, but we thought we had three months to do it. At the very least, time had been on our side. But not anymore. The situation had changed.

Chelsea was a woman who’d spent her entire life overcoming tough challenges, and now she was reduced to asking for the impossible. That’s how desperate things were. I had to do something for her.

“Chelsea, let’s go.”

“...Rekka?”

“We don’t have a lot of time, so we can’t waste what precious little time we do have sitting around here being depressed, right?”

Chelsea looked up at me in surprise.

“Let’s go to the cave and find the Demon’s Pot right now.”

Everyone in the room nodded.

▽

According to Chelsea, the Demon’s Pot was a hot topic among treasure hunters. The genie in the lamp, the fairy in the spring... There were all kinds of otherworldly beings in fairy tales who would grant people’s wishes. And so to a normal person, that’s all the Demon’s Pot was. A fairy tale. They probably laughed when they heard treasure hunters tell stories about it.

But since Chelsea was born into a family of mages, she had a certain level of awareness about the supernatural. She was probably able to see the deeper meaning in those funny stories and put the

pieces together for herself.

"Maybe it's a little late to be asking this... But this Demon's Pot actually belongs to a demon, right? Aren't they going to ask for something in return? Like your soul or something?" I asked Chelsea as we descended into the cave.

"As far as I can tell, there weren't any stories about people dying or families getting cursed after the pot was used to grant a wish. There are certain beings like the genie in Aladdin's lamp that exist for the purpose of granting wishes. I think the demon in the pot is something like that."

"Huh, you're right. The genie in Aladdin's story grants your wish just because you rub his lamp..."

I glanced at Satsuki, who nodded back at me. If the Magic of Omnipotence said it was safe, we probably didn't have to worry about the demon demanding some terrible price.

"Oh dear."

Suddenly, Silver Slayer was impaled by a spear that came flying down from the ceiling.

"Nwaaaaah!"

"Sir Namidare, calm down. I'm just fine," Silver Slayer assured me, despite her current condition.

She removed the spear, and the liquid silver that formed her body closed in on the hole to seal it. She was perfectly healed in an instant.

"Yeah... I mean, I knew this was going to happen, but it's really scary to actually see it."

I'd lost track of how many pitfalls, falling rocks, and spear traps we'd encountered. And each time we ran into one, something awful happened to Silver Slayer's body. She was intentionally walking in front of us to trigger any traps so the rest of us could stay safe, which meant that she had to be the one taking all the hits... Honestly, it wasn't good for my heart to watch.

Once Silver Slayer regenerated, we'd have her figure out how the trap worked, and then Chelsea, our trap specialist, would tell the rest of us how to cross it safely.

"Question," Silver Slayer said once we passed another rain of spears. "That trap was set so that the spears would follow automatically when someone passed under them."

"Yeah, there was no way to dodge it," I said.

We'd made ourselves a little covering in the corner of the path

that could block the spears, and crawled under that to get through.

"That is my question," Silver Slayer said.

"I thought it was weird too," Hibiki chimed in.

"Yeah, me too," said Chelsea, the same as the others.

"It certainly is strange, isn't it?" added Satsuki.

Huh? I was stumped. Was I the only one who didn't get it?

"Rekka, you're pretty dim when things aren't riding on a razor's edge, aren't you?"

Shaddup, R. Spears and rocks go right through you, so you don't even have to worry about any of this.

"Um... What's strange?" I choked down my embarrassment and asked.

"There's no right way through these traps," Silver Slayer explained.

But I still didn't get it. What did she mean by "no right way"?

"Explanation: All tools are made for a purpose. Normally, the purpose of traps of this nature would be to keep anyone who isn't the rightful owner of the pot from acquiring it. But if there's no safe path, not even the owner would be able to retrieve the treasure."

"Oh!"

That made sense. The whole reason you would put your treasure in a safe was to keep anyone else from getting to it. But if there was no key to the safe, there would be no real point to it.

We stopped to think about the situation for a moment.

"Bbz.... Bbzzzzzbbzzz... Be... Bzzzbz... Bzzbz... gone from this... Bzz... place..." Suddenly, a strange, staticky voice filled the cave. "...Bzzz... go.... Bzzb... Be gone..."

Be...? Be gone?

"Guys, did you hear that?"

Everyone nodded.

"I can't tell where it's coming from."

"It's probably magic being used to transmit sound from a distance," Satsuki said.

"...Be... Bzzzzz... gone..." The mysterious voice kept repeating itself.

It was really creepy...

"Sorry," I said, unsure if the speaker could even hear me, "but we can't do that."

We ignored the echoing voice and proceeded deeper into the cave.

▽

With Satsuki's help, we were able to map the caves. (We told Chelsea it was just search magic.) We went deeper and deeper until we reached where the Demon's Pot supposedly lay.

It was a small space compared to Jizu Village, but it was still big enough to hold almost a dozen people. In the back of the room were several tiny paths that seemed to lead still deeper into the cave. But the Demon's Pot itself was nestled in a tiny hole in the face of a rock wall.

"This pot is... less impressive than I was expecting," I said.

"Really? It looks like it's got some elaborate decorations to me."

"No, I was thinking it would be in a treasure chest or something."

The hole the pot was in had a flat bottom, but the rest of it was just natural rock.

"I will now remove it," Silver Slayer said.

She put her hands around it and lifted it up, careful of any last traps.

The Demon's Pot looked like a piece of pottery an Arabian king might have used to decorate his mansion. The pot was almost spherical. It was emerald in color, with golden handles on either side, and topped with a tiny golden stopper like a wine bottle would have.

"We just have to take the stopper out, right?"

Chelsea gulped. She pulled on the stopper, and there was a popping sound like someone uncorking a bottle.

In that instant, purple smoke began to pour out of the pot. The smoke coalesced in the shape of a human. What looked like a young Arabian dancing girl appeared floating in the air before us out of the smoke. She had purple hair, tied back with a golden hairpiece, and her body was decorated with expensive-looking adornments. She wore a pair of puffy white pants, but above them most of her dark amber skin was exposed.

"...Tch." She glared at us and clicked her tongue loudly.

It was obvious just from looking at her that she was ticked.

Chelsea was hesitating. She seemed worried about how to address the being she was about to ask for a wish. If she said the wrong thing and made her mad, maybe she wouldn't grant her wish at all. It made perfect sense that Chelsea would get nervous now.

So I decided to test the waters first.

"...Hey," I said.

"What the hell do you want?" the girl snapped back.

Yeah. She was definitely about to lose it.

"Um... Wh-What's your name?"

"Queen Ulaula the Great."

"'The Great'?"

"You got a problem with that?"

"Not at all, Queen Ulaula the Great."

This little girl, or demon, or whatever she was, was seriously scary.

Also, R, please stop making funny poses behind Ulaula. You're making me want to laugh!

"S-So... Queen Ulaula the Great, can we assume that you're the demon who grants wishes?"

"That's right. What do you want from me now? You greedy humans are never satisfied," she asked, raising a haughty eyebrow.

"Oh, um... You first, Chelsea."

Arrogant or not, if this girl was who we hoped she was, she could grant Chelsea's wish. I motioned Chelsea forward and had her stand in front of Ulaula.

"...I want you to cure my sick brother," she pleaded desperately as she pressed her hands together tightly in front of her chest.

And the wish-granting demon...

"No. No. No. Not a chance in hell."

...told her no? W-Wait a second!

"Ulaula, you can't..."

"'Ulaula'?"

"Queen Ulaula the Great! A-Aren't you supposed to grant any wish?"

"Yeah, that's right. My job is to follow the demonic contract and grant you nasty, greedy humans your wishes."

Now I was just confused.

"Then why won't you grant Chelsea's wish?"

"Because I don't want to."

"But tell me why!"

I scratched my head. We were getting nowhere.

Finally, Satsuki, who'd been listening from behind us, took a step forward.

"But Queen Ulaula the Great, you've granted many wishes in

the past, haven't you? The last wish you granted was 172 years ago, to a man named Eli Perry who wanted to become rich," Satsuki said, her words coming out smooth and unfaltering.

Chelsea looked at her, shocked. "Satsuki... how did you know that?" she asked.

There was nothing that detailed in the documents about the Demon's Pot that Chelsea had showed us.

"I'm sorry for not telling you sooner. I'm not actually a normal mage. If I told you I was the heir to the Magic of Omnipotence, would you know what I was talking about?"

"The Magic of Omnipotence?!"

The legends of the Great Omnipotent Magic were well known among mages, so a former mage-in-training like Chelsea would certainly know about it. But...

"Satsuki, are you sure about this?"

Satsuki's family had kept the secret of their magic hidden from the world for generations. The power to access the Akashic Record and view the entire history of the universe was far too dangerous to treat casually.

"It's all right. She's not a bad person."

"I see," I said.

If Satsuki was okay with this, then so was I. And that left us right back at...

"Now, Queen Ulaula the Great, you've granted many wishes in the past. So why do you refuse to grant hers?"

"...Tch."

"If you're not willing to tell me, I can just find out for myself..."

"This is why I hate human beings. You're the most obnoxious creatures imaginable," Ulaula barked, frowning angrily. "The reason is simple. That woman is a mage."

"What?"

"I don't like mages," Ulaula spat out in answer to my question. "They try to make miracles on their own, without relying on my power. To someone like me whose job it is to grant wishes, you're basically stealing my work."

Um... So in other words, she was upset because she felt like her role in life was being taken away from her?

"And a long time ago, a mage did something terrible to me." Her eyes were twitching, as if she was trying to repress her rage.

"Does that mean that you're the one who set up those traps

with no way through them?" Hibiki asked.

"That's right."

"But those would be enough to kill almost anyone who wasn't a mage. You said you hate mages, but is it really that you hate all of mankind?"

"No. I don't mind disgusting, nasty humans."

"Then you'll grant my wish and Rekka's, right?" Hibiki continued her line of questioning.

She had a good point. I wasn't a mage, and neither was she. But the demon of wishes still looked upset.

"Didn't you hear what I said? I like the disgusting, nasty humans."

"What do you mean?" Hibiki asked.

"You just said most people would die in those traps, and you were right. But 'most' means that a few still survive. When a human sacrifices their comrades to make it through those deadly traps, a madness comes to dwell in their eyes."

With those words, Ulaula smiled for the first time. It was indeed the smile of a demon, inspiring fear in all who saw it.

"The humans who come to me with that madness in their eyes are possessed by insatiable greed. Any morals or ethics they had are long gone, and all that's left is pure greed. They're the worst kind of scum there is."

Ulaula laughed with a cold smile that suggested a madness of her own.

"And it's so much fun to watch these fallen creatures. Even a demon like me can't help falling in love with them. That man whose name you mentioned, Eli Perry? He used his fortune to fulfill for himself every desire a man could ever have, and at the same time drove over ten thousand of his fellow tribesmen mad with despair. Unchecked greed," she said, "brings unchecked misery."

After floating in the air all this time, her feet finally touched the ground and she walked over to me. Standing next to me, I could see that she was a lot shorter than I was... but she suddenly grabbed me by the collar and yanked me down to her eye level.

"And so why are your eyes so pure? Both you and the girl. I see a little fear, but none of the greed I want to see in order to grant your wish. I don't like it one bit."

She then let go and kicked me hard in the solar plexus.

"Ow!"

She just grit her teeth and sneered.

"And so I've got no intention of granting your wish," she said. "Get out of here."

There wasn't even room to negotiate. That much was clear from her attitude.

"But... But wait!"

I tried to come up with something to say, but I couldn't think of anything that would get her to change her mind quickly. At this rate, she was going to go back into her pot without granting even one wish.

"Wait, please." It was Satsuki that tried to stop her.

"...Do you need something else?" The demon looked around, aggravated.

It sure didn't look like anything we said would convince her.

"There's no point in lying to us." Satsuki refused to be afraid.

"Lying?"

"Queen Ulaula, you are the Wish-Granting Demon. Just like you said, granting wishes is your job. It's why you exist. You can't change that."

"..."

"You're trying to scare us so we lose the desire for you to grant us our wish. Because if we lose that desire, you won't have to do it."

"..."

"But Satsuki, didn't Ulaula just refuse to grant Chelsea's wish?"

"That's Queen Ulaula to you, stupid human," a very angry Ulaula snapped.

I ignored her and waited for my childhood friend to answer.

"Yes, you're right. But unlike a normal demon, Queen Ulaula the Great is a special, wish-granting type. Just like I said, she can't change who she is... and right now, she's trying her absolute best to stay in control."

"In control?"

"Look. Queen Ulaula, why is your face twitching so hard?" Satsuki turned the conversation back to Ulaula.

"..."

She fell silent and stared at Satsuki, but her eyebrows were spasming every few seconds. I realized now why she'd been switching her expressions so dramatically. She'd been going between laughing, sneering, and gritting her teeth. It was to keep us from seeing that she was trying her hardest not to grant Chelsea's

wish, wasn't it?

"Miss Margaret, don't let her intimidate you. If she really was free to refuse your request, she could've just gone back inside her pot. The fact that she hasn't done that suggests there's some reason she can't. For example... when someone comes to her with a wish, she can't go back into her pot until she grants it, perhaps?"

"...!"

Life finally returned to Chelsea's face.

What Satsuki was saying made sense. If she hated us that much, she could just leave. But she hadn't. Or maybe she couldn't. And that meant there had to be a reason.

"This is why I hate mages so much..."

Ulaula's grimace was at least three times steelier than it had been a moment ago. The young girl grabbed her ponytail and twirled it in her hand before continuing.

"Fine. I'll issue a demonic contract. But!" She held her palm up. In a puff of purple smoke, a sheet of parchment appeared in her hand, which she then threw at me. "I'm adding a restriction and a price to the contract."

"A restriction... and a price?"

That didn't sound good.

"You've granted all your other wishes for free. Are you allowed to just change the rules like that?"

I decided to pretend like it didn't scare me as much as it did.

"I can do whatever I want. Until now, I've decided that the misery and madness caused by the people whose wishes I granted was a good enough price for me. But I don't think I'll be getting any of that from you, so I've got the right to demand a fair price for my goods. I am a demon, after all."

Ulaula must have seen right through me, because her lips curled up into a grin.

"The restriction is that only a normal human can sign the contract. No mages, and that inhuman creature over there can't sign it either."

Silver Slayer had no reaction. She had been totally silent so far, and silent she remained.

But if that was Ulaula's rule, that meant the only ones here who could sign the contract and have their wishes granted were me and Hibiki. But so far so good. There was nothing that said one of us couldn't just wish for Chelsea's brother to be cured in her stead. The

problem was...

"And as for the price..."

When we were going through the caves, I'd asked Satsuki if the demon might demand something in return. She'd indicated that I didn't need to worry about it, so I'd put it out of my mind. I was starting to think that was a mistake.

Demons usually only wanted one thing, didn't they? I gulped audibly. And at last...

"The life of the person who signs the contract."

It was about as bad as I'd expected. In a sense, it was the highest possible price she could ask for. The cost of the contract was a human life.

"Rekka, I'm sure you understand this, but I'm not going to let you do anything stupid," Satsuki said.

"Yeah, I know. If I die, I can't save the other stories. So the same goes for you too, Hibiki."

"I wasn't even thinking about it," Hibiki said angrily. But she looked worried.

There wasn't time to find another way to cure Chelsea's brother. Our only real hope now would be to get Ulaula to change her mind and renege on the price for the contract... but I didn't have the faintest clue how to go about convincing her to do that. Still, I had to keep moving forward.

"Queen Ulaula the Great, there's only one contract here. Can you give me another one for Hibiki?"

"Flip the page and you'll find as many as you need."

I turned the sheet of parchment over, and sure enough, a second identical contract appeared from below. It really was some kind of demonic item.

"Write down your wish in your own blood. Then sign your name, and the contract will be complete. Think carefully about what you write, because once you sign it, there's no canceling it."

"Got it," I said.

Since I didn't actually need any more contracts, I turned the parchment back over. As I was contemplating what to do, Silver Slayer suddenly gave a start and turned around.

"...What's wrong?" I asked, unnerved by her sudden movement.

"The vampire approaches. Quickly. She's headed right for us." There was the tiniest bit of uncertainty in her expressionless voice.

"She wasn't tracking us... so how?"

I had no idea how to answer that. The one thing that even a dimwit like me could be sure of in this situation was that things had just gotten worse.

Chapter 5: Those Who Gave Up and Those Who Never Will

“She’s approaching at an incredible speed. She seems to be going right over the mountains and ocean... Is she moving through the sky? Her current speed is practically impossible. She’s right on top of us now,” Silver Slayer reported mechanically.

“...What’s going on?” Chelsea asked, looking up at the ceiling of the cave.

Directly above us, according to Silver Slayer, were Rosalind and the other girls.

“I think she’s using Iris’s spaceship,” I said.

“Spaceship?!” Chelsea yelled.

“I didn’t have time to tell you, but one of the girls Rosalind was controlling at her mansion is an alien.”

“...I really underestimated you guys.” Chelsea shook her head. She’d gone beyond surprise and entered a state of mild shock. But her expression quickly changed. “So what now? We can put my wish aside for the moment.”

“Chelsea...”

“If all of you get taken out, I’m doomed too.” She winked at me and put on a brave face, but her hands were at her sides, gripped into tight, trembling fists.

It had already been two hours since she’d gotten the call saying that her brother’s condition was getting worse. It wasn’t like we could get any cell phone reception down here, either. But even so... she was willing to put her own story on hold so that we could make the right choice here. No, she was acting strong in order to keep us from hesitating and ruining everything.

“The vampire is rapidly progressing through the cave’s traps. Estimated time of arrival is a few minutes,” Silver Slayer said, updating us on Rosalind’s position.

“Don’t worry. My brother’s sick, but he’s a tough kid. He’s fighting his illness even as we speak. He wouldn’t drop out of the

fight while the rest of us are still at it," said Chelsea.

She was only three years older than me, but she was such a strong woman.

"...All right. First, we'll do something about Rosalind."

I switched gears and readied myself to face this new opponent. I couldn't let Chelsea's resolve be for nothing. I needed to bring all the stories to a happy ending.

"Now this is getting entertaining." Ulaula was laughing, but I didn't have time to waste on her.

"Silver Slayer, can you make me another knife?" Hibiki asked.

"Affirmative," Silver Slayer said as she formed new knives for Hibiki and Chelsea.

"Hey, can I have one too?" I asked.

"According to my memory bank, you said you couldn't use a knife, Sir Namidare."

"Just a small one's fine."

This deep in the cave, there was nowhere to run. There was no avoiding a throw down with Rosalind, so if I wanted to stop her, I needed to be ready to fight.

"Satsuki," I said.

"What?"

"I want you to hide in one of those paths up ahead and support us with magic if you can," I told her, pointing to one of the small paths continuing deeper into the cave.

"I can only use magic to protect myself or run away. And besides, my defensive spells don't work as well if I'm too far away, so let me stay by your side and protect you."

"...All right. Thanks." I nodded.

"Less than one minute," Silver Slayer said calmly.

We readied ourselves, but...

"What's that sound?" Hibiki whispered.

I listened carefully and could hear what sounded like a low roar. An instant later, a blast of water came surging out of the passage we'd come from.

"What the hell?!"

The water swept me away before I could even react, slamming me against the cavern wall. My head made a nasty sound when it hit the rock wall, but I managed to grab on to an outcropping and keep the water from washing me further down one of the tunnels. Fortunately there wasn't too much of it, so it quickly drained down

the pathways on the opposite side of the room.

"Is everyone okay?" I heard one of the girls ask.

It looked like everyone had managed to grab on to something too, but we'd all been cut or bruised somewhere. That had caught us totally off guard.

And then a voice came echoing through the corridor...

"I've finally caught up to you."

Before any of us had a chance to prepare ourselves, Rosalind, Iris, Lea, and Harissa all came into the room. That blast of water must've been Lea's magic. The water that had gotten into my mouth had a salty taste to it, so she'd probably brought some seawater with her all the way down here.

"...I don't recognize one of you," Rosalind said.

"I'm neutral." Ulaula held up her hands. "Don't worry about me."

"Hmph... Lea, Iris. Grab everyone but Namidare."

"Yes, my lady," the two of them answered even more lifelessly than before. One of them jumped at Silver Slayer, and the other at Hibiki and Chelsea.

"Satsuki, over here." I moved Satsuki behind me to protect her.

The surprise attack had split us into two groups. Hibiki and Silver Slayer had their hands full with Lea and Iris. I couldn't count on them coming to help me now.

"It's been a while, Namidare." Rosalind wasn't smiling when she spoke.

"...Hey. How'd you find me here?"

"It was easy. Harissa?"

When Rosalind addressed her, Harissa chanted a short spell. A single bat appeared out of thin air. It flew towards Rosalind with a high-pitched screeching and fused with her body.

"You sent an invisible bat to follow us, huh?"

"I can tell where my familiars are at any time, if you must know."

It was a possibility we'd overlooked. We'd only been worried about Rosalind herself, not her familiars. I ground my teeth in frustration, but it didn't do me any good now.

"Namidare... I'll give you one last chance. If you agree to give in to my charm spell instead of resisting, I'll let all the girls go."

"I refuse."

"...Do you really hate me that much?"

“No, that’s not it.” I shook my head. “If I admit defeat here, maybe Hibiki can still save Chelsea’s story, but Silver Slayer’s will be doomed. And...”

“...And?”

“No matter how much I think about it, I don’t think helping you with your revenge is the right way to save your story.”

Her real goal was something more than revenge. It had to be. That was a stab in the dark on my part, or really just a gut feeling, but more importantly...

“Rosalind, if you do get your revenge on me, will that make you happy?”

That was what really mattered. Would exacting her revenge on me in lieu of my ancestor truly make her happy? Looking at her now, it was hard to believe that was really the case. She wasn’t smiling at all. Her expression was almost the exact opposite of when she was eating her red bean jam bun the other day.

“What this Namidare wants to do... is make you happy, Rosalind. And I don’t think what you’re asking me to do is the right way to go about making that happen. So I’m going to fight you with everything I have. Not because I hate you, but because I want to find a way to make everyone, including you, happy.”

“All of you are like that, aren’t you? Mere humans who refuse to back down in the face of a vampire. Who refuse to give up. And... who refuse to be mine...”

“...All of us?”

Was she talking about me and my ancestor? And what did she mean by “become mine”? But before I even had time to think about it...

“So I’m done wishing for more than I’m going to get.”

The air around Rosalind changed.

“I wanted you as you really were, but I’m done with that. All I need is for you to be by my side. That’s all that matters. And so...”

She took another step forward.

“I’m going to make you into a vampire, Namidare.”

“What?!”

She came closer and closer, each step more determined than the last. She wasn’t even going to use her charm magic this time. She was just going to turn me into a vampire.

What was I supposed to do? If I had any chance, it was to break the spell on Iris, Lea, and Harissa. But unlike my childhood friend

Satsuki, I had no idea what I could say to make them mad or embarrass them.

I was starting to panic.

At this point, I had to make a choice. I just had to steel myself to fight a vampire. Silver Slayer said that the power of her charm weakened when Rosalind became flustered or was caught off guard, so I didn't actually need to defeat her. If I could just do a little bit of damage with the silver knife and then distract her for a moment...

"Rekka! I've got an idea!"

"Ow!"

Satsuki suddenly grabbed me by the ear and started whispering to me.

"You want me to do WHAT?!" I yelled when she told me her "plan."

"Just say it!"

"R-Right!"

I didn't know why on earth she would suggest something like that. I figured if Satsuki thought it would work, then it was worth a try, but I really had no idea what she was thinking! I took a deep breath, turned to Harissa, and screamed...

"I-I love you!"

But...

"....."

Harissa didn't even twitch.

"It didn't work, Satsuki!"

"I-I thought that any girl would be embarrassed if a boy said that to her!"

Rather than Harissa, Satsuki was the one who started blushing.

That doesn't work unless it's a boy you like, right? And wait, if anyone should be embarrassed here, it's me! Ugh... But now wasn't the time for this! Rosalind was...

"Wh-Wh-What?!"

For some reason, she was totally freaking out. I was trying to figure out how to handle this unexpected development when I heard a thud. I looked and saw that Silver Slayer had bound Iris and Lea up with a silver rope. Rosalind's charm had weakened for a moment, and Silver Slayer hadn't missed that chance. I really wasn't sure how it had happened, but it worked out in our favor. Now it was five against two.

"Rosalind, surrender and undo your charm spells."

“Hmph. You’re asking me to give up?”

“I’m just asking you to give up on revenge so we can think things through together. We can figure out a way for everyone to be happy.”

While Rosalind and I were talking, my other three companions closed in. Hibiki and Silver Slayer stood on either side of Rosalind with knives to her throat, and Chelsea was standing next to me to protect Satsuki.

“It’s over, vampire,” Silver Slayer said.

“Don’t try anything,” Hibiki added.

“...It seems I’ve embarrassed myself,” Rosalind said. Her panic from a moment ago was gone and her air of superiority returned. “Lea... Do it.”

“!”

With no warning, Silver Slayer’s body rose into the air. She tried to struggle, but her body froze as if she’d been dipped in liquid nitrogen.

“What did you do?!” Hibiki shouted.

She tried to use her silver knife to stop Rosalind, but an outstretched hand grabbed her by the wrist.

“Harissa?!” Hibiki yelled in surprise as she tried to shake off Harissa’s hand, but it was no use. Harissa’s grip was like a vise.

“Harissa? How?”

Even with the charm spell, Harissa shouldn’t be that strong. There was no way she could overpower Hibiki! As I watched on, Harissa started to open her mouth.

“!”

That was when I caught a glimpse of her teeth. No, not teeth... Those were fangs! The next thing I knew, Harissa was sinking those fangs of hers into Hibiki’s neck.

“Aaaaah!” Hibiki screamed.

“Hibiki!” I shouted.

“No, Rekka!” Satsuki yelled.

I was about to run forward when she grabbed me from behind. She was thinking clearly while I wasn’t, but... but...! I couldn’t help it. My heart was filled with rage and panic.

“Rosalind! You turned Harissa... You turned them all into vampires, didn’t you?!”

“Of course,” Rosalind answered with a glare. “I knew what your answer was going to be from the very beginning, so I made sure

that I had insurance."

She looked up at Silver Slayer, who was floating immobile in the air.

"This doll can't be harmed because her body is made of liquid... But if you surround her with a bubble of water and increase the pressure inside of it, you can shut her down."

"...!"

That first blast of water... Most of it had flowed down the paths leading deeper into the cave, but some of it was left in the holes along the walls and floor. Or so I thought. When I looked around for it now, I didn't see so much as a single drop left! Was Harissa using her invisibility spell to make Lea's water magic invisible?!

What appeared to be a simple surprise attack turned out to be a carefully planned trick. I'd been completely outwitted.

"The despair in your eyes! I love it!" Ulaula clapped her hands happily, but a look from Rosalind shut her up.

"Now, I have no intention of asking you nicely or giving you another chance. Give up," Rosalind commanded.

"I don't like giving up."

But what was I supposed to do? I was trapped.

"...Rekka..."

I heard Hibiki call my name even as Harissa was draining her blood.

"Run..." she gasped.

She had her hands behind her back, holding what looked like a tube of some kind. When Harissa let go, Hibiki's twitching body fell forward towards the floor. But as she fell, she pulled the pin from the top of the tube she was holding with her right hand.

"Close your eyes!" Chelsea yelled as she turned and threw her arms up to cover my face and Satsuki's.

There was a tiny clinking sound, and then a blast of light filled my field of vision. It was only thanks to Chelsea that it didn't blind me entirely. But even with my eyes closed, they still stung. Was that what they called a flash grenade?

"We're getting out here!"

Chelsea grabbed my arm—and probably Satsuki's as well—and tried to pull us back.

"But Chelsea...!"

"We have to get out of here! If we don't regroup, we'll be wiped out!"

"..."

I hated to admit it, but she was right. I let her drag me along for a while, but I ran on my own power once I could see again.

▽

We ran as fast as we could along the paths going deeper into the cave, trying to get as far away from Rosalind as possible. We ran until we couldn't anymore, collapsing on the ground to catch our breaths.

"Hahh... Hahh... Now what do we do?"

I didn't have a lot of cards left in my hand. One silver knife. Satsuki's magic. And...

"This contract, huh?"

I took out the parchment that I'd folded up and put into my pocket.

Chelsea was silent, but her gaze was wavering as if she wanted to say something.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to abandon your brother. But I think that unless we can use this thing properly, we don't stand a chance of winning."

It was probably our last hope.

"Let's go over what we know. Our job is..."

To cure Chelsea's sick brother. To save everyone who'd been turned into a vampire—that is, to make them human again. To save Rosalind's story. Silver Slayer's too.

"...It's not enough," Chelsea said.

She was right. The only person who could use the contract now was me. I had one wish and four problems to solve. That wasn't enough to pull it off.

"Let's not give up. We can just keep thinking. Dig deep and examine every possibility. And if you think of anything, let's talk about it..."

As I spoke, I recalled what Rosalind had said earlier that had gotten my attention. "All of you..." It was like she thought of me and my ancestor as the same person. And then there was the strange way she'd said "refuse to be mine."

The short of it was that most of my problems now had something to do with Rosalind. I shared with Satsuki and Chelsea what she had said, hoping it would lead to some kind of hint. When

I did, Chelsea looked a little exasperated.

"Rekka, I think she sees you as a substitute."

"A substitute?"

"In other words, she wants you at her side because she couldn't have your ancestor."

"……What?"

I understood the words that were coming out of her mouth, but I had no idea what she was saying.

"I mean, it's the only thing that makes sense."

"That's impossible…"

Despite what I said, I was slowly starting to put the pieces together in my head. Like why Rosalind came all the way to my high school, for instance. Or why she hadn't just jumped me in an alleyway one night if she really wanted revenge. Or why she used her charm magic to control everyone but me. Or why, even when she tried to do it, she'd left me with most of my will. Or why she'd used the charm magic instead of just turning me into a vampire in the first place.

"She wanted the 'real' me, huh?" She'd said something to that effect just a few minutes ago.

When she'd turned the others into vampires, they were like dolls. It was probably the power she had over them after sucking their blood. A charm spell might hold sway over someone, but it was still mind control.

If she wanted me to still be me, the first thing she would try would be to charm the people around me in order to get to me. Then if that didn't work, she'd have to try charming me anyway. And if that still didn't work, she'd finally have no choice but to turn me into a vampire…

I bit down hard on my back teeth.

"I can't possibly be a replacement for my ancestor."

This vampire's lived five hundred years and she still doesn't understand that?

The light bulb finally came on. If I wanted to save Rosalind's story, I needed to stop her revenge—no, I needed to stop her from using me as a substitute. And to do that, I first needed to get out of this grim situation.

"You said some elixir could cure your brother, right?" I asked, my voice filled with new resolve and a little bit of anger.

"That's true, but…" Chelsea's voice trailed off. She paused and

then said, “The philosopher’s stone that I would need to make it is part of Silver Slayer’s core. If I ripped it out of her, her body would fall apart.”

Satsuki explained to me in detail how the magic and alchemy involved actually worked.

“Then what if I used the contract to have Ulaula make Silver Slayer human? What would happen to the philosopher’s stone? Would it disappear?” I asked.

Both Satsuki and Chelsea looked shocked.

Turning Silver Slayer into a human was an idea I’d had when we were looking at the white flower together. I thought that might be what her story needed.

“Um… I don’t think so. The philosopher’s stone is perfected matter. No physical force or magic—not even a miracle—could destroy it from the outside.”

“I see.”

Then that would solve two stories at once.

“That just leaves turning everyone back, and then Rosalind herself…”

“Wait, Rekka! That contract had a price, remember?” Satsuki said.

She was right. The person who signed the contract needed to give their life. That was the price. But I couldn’t just give up because of that. There might be a loophole I hadn’t found yet.

“The price is the life of the person who makes the contract, right? But how exactly do they die? Does their soul just leave their body the instant they sign it?”

“The demonic contract is an agreement between two souls, so the moment you sign it, your soul belongs to the demon. But a soul is bound to the body, and it can’t just leave on its own. So you won’t straight up die, but if she touches your soul, it’s all over.”

“Where is the soul, exactly?”

“You can think of your soul as inhabiting the exact same space as your physical body.”

In other words, if she touched me somewhere, my soul would be ripped from my body? It was like a lethal game of tag, never mind the fact that I was playing with a demon.

But at the very least, I wouldn’t die immediately just for making the contract.

“So if we can do something before she touches me, we can turn

Silver Slayer from a homunculus into a human. And that gives us a philosopher's stone, too... But then how do we turn everyone back?"

Wait. Turn a homunculus into a human? Turn everyone back? Hang on...

"Satsuki, I have one more question," I said.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's about the rules for the demonic contract..."

Satsuki seemed a little confused by the simple question I proceeded to ask her, but she nodded affirmatively in response. That meant we could do this after all!

"Satsuki. Chelsea. I need your help with something."

I told them my plan, including what I needed them to do.

"That's risky as hell... Are you trying to get yourself killed?" Chelsea asked warily.

"Life's about taking risks," I said, steeling myself for what was to come.

That's right. My life wasn't some toy to hand over to Rosalind, and it certainly wasn't something I would sacrifice to entertain a demon. It was my last chip, but I was going all in to bring these stories to a happy ending.

Chapter 6: What You Should See

Shortly after I explained my plan to the girls, we got a message from Rosalind via Lea's telepathy.

"If you don't come back in the next ten minutes, I'll start killing them one by one."

We ran back to the cavern with the Demon's Pot as fast as we could.

"Hahh... Hahh... It hasn't been ten minutes yet..."

Rosalind was standing there in ominous silence. I'd kept my end of the bargain, but she still looked unhappy.

Nevertheless, booking it back had paid off. The other girls were all safe. Even Hibiki had woken up from the shock of becoming a vampire. Silver Slayer was still trapped in her water prison, but the water wasn't invisible anymore.

"Hey there, human. I didn't think you'd really come back. Are you planning on getting killed? Or do you want to make a wish before you die? A death wish, perhaps? Hahaha!"

And of course, Ulaula was still there too. She was sitting cross-legged next to her pot in the corner of the room. She was watching us like someone would a movie.

"Silence, lesser demon. You will not be permitted to speak," Rosalind said, glaring in Ulaula's direction.

That's right. Keep your mouth shut.

I didn't want her to start asking questions.

"Now then..." Rosalind whispered, watching as Hibiki raised a silver knife to her own heart. "This strikes me as more effective than simply trying to kill you."

"...!"

We all tensed. If I tried anything, she'd kill them one by one. What Ulaula said had put her on guard. I needed to distract her and gain the upper hand somehow.

"Now come here. I'll suck your blood and turn you into a vampire."

"...And then I'll be yours since you can't have my ancestor?"

"...Yes, that's right."

Not even that ruffled her feathers, huh?

I guess it made sense. Once Rosalind had drained the other girls' blood, there was no going back for her. It would take more than that to shake her up. But that in and of itself told me exactly how uncertain she was.

"Wait, you knew where I was the whole time. Why didn't you just come and get me?" I kept talking, taking a slow step forward like a cow.

"I was recovering from the damage to my life force that the silver caused."

"But vampires can recover by draining blood, right?"

Powerful vampires didn't need to drink blood to survive like weaker ones did, but that didn't mean that they couldn't use blood to recover their life force if they needed to.

"Iris, Harissa, Lea... You drained the blood of three people. So why did you let us go for a few days?"

"It was... to find out what you were planning."

"And why did you need to do that?"

She was already tracking us. She could have attacked at any time. Of course, it might have taken her a while to come up with the plan of trapping Silver Slayer in a water prison. But from what Silver Slayer had said, between her and Rosalind, Rosalind was the stronger of the two. Silver Slayer just couldn't be defeated because her body was made of silver. The only reason we'd been able to do so much damage this time was because Rosalind was injured.

And the reason for that... was probably me.

She'd been so focused on me during the fight at the station that she'd been too slow to respond to Silver Slayer's attack. And at the mansion, she'd come after us even when she was blinded to try and get me back.

"Rosalind, this time it's not a question."

I took another step forward, choosing my words carefully to keep her attention on me.

As I did, Satsuki moved slowly to my left toward Ulaula, and Chelsea moved to my right toward Hibiki. It was time to finish this!

"You know exactly why you didn't come after me for days. You knew that even if you got me this way, you could never be happy!" I shouted.

Rosalind was aghast.

No matter what twisted way someone might have of achieving it, everyone's end goal is always happiness. That's all people really want. And when Rosalind realized that would be denied to her yet again, she froze.

When she did, I took the contract out of my pocket and pressed my thumb (which I'd already cut with the knife) up against the parchment to finish writing out the last "e" in "Rekka Namidare."

"Ulaula! This is my contract! Turn everyone that Rosalind turned into a vampire back again!"

The contract I'd signed burned up in a puff of purple smoke.

"Haha! So that's your wish?!" Ulaula's laugh echoed throughout the cavern.

That was creepy enough, but then I felt a chill like a cold, invisible hand had reached inside me and grabbed me by the stomach. The contract had given the demon possession of my soul. And if I let her touch me now, she'd take my life too. But in exchange...

"Huh? What am I doing?"

"...?"

"Where am I?"

"Hm?"

Iris, Harissa, Lea, and Hibiki all returned to normal.

Since Lea had been using her water magic at Rosalind's orders, the bubble around Silver Slayer burst and she fell helplessly to the ground. She'd been trapped in that high-pressure prison for a while now. I didn't expect her to be able to move for some time.

"Lea! Iris! Stop Rosalind!"

Lea reacted first. She had been there at the station and knew what Rosalind really was. Iris was quick to join in afterward. Even if she didn't remember what had happened while she was a vampire, she probably still had at least a vague memory of being charmed. She could tell Rosalind was an enemy one way or another.

"Chelsea!"

"Okay!"

Chelsea made a dash for Hibiki to carry out her part of the plan.

"Rekka!" Satsuki cried frantically.

I turned around and saw Ulaula charging at me.

"The contract says your life is mine now!" she shouted, reaching out her hand.

Satsuki jumped between us and chanted a defensive spell.

“Guardian Winds!”

A shield of wind appeared, and the demon’s childlike fists smashed into it like a brick wall.

“Tch! Damned mage!” Ulaula yelled.

She couldn’t break through, but it wasn’t knocking her back either.

“What are you doing to Namidare?!” Rosalind shouted even as she fought Iris and Lea.

“Oh, I’m a demon, you see.” Ulaula laughed hideously.

Iris and Lea seemed surprised, but I yelled for them to concentrate on Rosalind. It was time for the next part of my plan.

“Ulaula, grant my wish!”

Now it was Hibiki’s turn. She grabbed the contract from Chelsea, cut her finger with her knife, and started to write out what Chelsea had told her to.

I'd turned everyone back into humans first in order to make sure Hibiki was able to meet the restriction Ulaula had put on the contracts. And the "wish" I'd had Chelsea relay to her was to turn Silver Slayer into a human. When Hibiki finished writing, the contract burned up and disappeared just like mine had.

"Huh...?"

Ulaula looked confused even as she was still trying to pierce through Satsuki's wind shield. But she was a wish-granting demon and a contract had been signed.

"...Agh! Ack! Gaaha!" Silver Slayer moaned and coughed up something red.

It was probably the philosopher's stone. Now that she was human, she'd probably spit it out. Things were proceeding smoothly at this rate, but I was momentarily sidetracked by an unexpected noise.

"Hngh!"

"Gwaah!"

I turned to see Rosalind knock Iris and Lea away, slamming them into a nearby wall.

"Iris! Lea!"

"Now that I've had my fill of blood, those two aren't strong enough to stop me."

"Ugh..."

"Gaah..."

Iris and Lea were still on the ground, barely conscious. Neither of them looked like they could stand.

"Prepare yourself, Namidare."

Of course, Rosalind's next target was me.

"Oooh, how scary! Maybe I'll come for this human later and take the life of the one over there first instead," said Ulaula, clearly enjoying herself. She decided to give up on me and turn her attention to Hibiki.

Crap! I had Satsuki to protect me, but Hibiki was defenseless! But then...

"Not happening!"

"What?!"

With no defensive magic, Chelsea pounced on Ulaula and pinned her to the floor.

“You failure of a mage! Get off of me!”

Blood poured from Chelsea’s lips as she was battered with the powerful arms of the tiny demon. But she held in there in order to protect Hibiki. Just when I told myself I needed to go save her, she looked up at me as if she’d read my mind.

“Rekka, just do your job!”

My job...? My job was to carry out the plan I’d come up with and save everyone.

“Right!”

It was a difficult decision to make in heat of the moment, but I couldn’t let the risk Chelsea was taking be meaningless. The best way to save her was to act fast... but I was about to run into my own wall that I’d have to break through.

“Namidare!” Rosalind’s eyes flashed as she leaped at me.

I quickly readied my silver knife, even though I knew my odds of winning a fight with her were low. But then...

“Ealim Nekram!”

Harissa’s voice echoed through the cave and Rosalind’s expression changed to one of shock. Harissa had cast her invisibility spell on me and Satsuki!

We looked at each other in surprise.

One of the great perks of Harissa’s invisibility magic was that the people it was cast on could still see each other. After realizing what had happened, we ran over to Silver Slayer. But Rosalind wasn’t giving up.

“Damn you!”

She changed her right arm into a black and red wolf. It was huge, easily twice the size of the others I’d seen before. Its fangs and claws alone were big enough that a single swipe from either one would knock us out of the fight. And let’s not forget its keen sense of smell.

“Grrrrr!”

Once it picked up our scent, it leaped right for us. But before its fangs could reach us, its body suddenly froze in mid-air. Balls of water had entrapped its head and limbs.

“Lea!”

“Hurry up and do it... I can’t... keep this up for long...”

She still couldn’t stand up, but she’d used the last of her power to give me this chance. I couldn’t let it go to waste!

“Right!”

I raised the knife high and cut a huge slice in the wolf's exposed torso. Normally it would take a ton of strength to do something like that, but the power silver had over vampires made it easy for the blade to slide right through.

The wolf whined. The small silver knife had drained a great deal of the wolf's vampiric life source. It trashed about in its watery prison and foam spilled from its mouth as it collapsed.

With one last whimper, the wolf turned into a puff of red fog and reformed into Rosalind's right arm. She fell to her knees in pain. The damage must have affected her as well.

The water balls burst and splashed against the ground as well. Lea had run out of energy and fallen unconscious.

Satsuki and I nodded at each other once more and ran over to Silver Slayer.

"Harissa, undo the invisibility magic! And come over here too!"

"Okay!"

Harissa dismissed her spell and joined us. I had the two girls watch our surroundings while I lifted Silver Slayer up off the ground. I picked up the philosopher's stone, too, and gave it to Satsuki.

"Harissa, use your healing magic on her."

"Okay, Sir Rekka!"

Her staff shone with a pale light as she healed Silver Slayer's body. It wouldn't bring back her strength, but it would ease the pain she was suffering.

"Ugh... Hngh..."

"Sorry, Silver Slayer! I need you to wake up!"

"Huh...? Sir... Namidare?"

"Do you understand what's going on right now?"

"Affirmative... I was vaguely awake, so I have a grasp of the situation."

"Then I want you to use this contract to make a wish."

I took another piece of parchment out of my pocket. We could make as many contracts as we wanted, so just in case, Chelsea and I had several.

"Listen, what I need you to wish for is..." I explained the last phase of the plan to Silver Slayer.

"...I understand."

She took the contract from me, pricked her finger with a knife, and began to write in her own blood.

“What kind of wish is this?!” Ulaula, who was still being held down by Chelsea, screamed.

The moment the contract was made, she probably became aware of what was written on it. But even if it was a contract she didn’t want to fulfill...

“You said that there’s no canceling it, right?”

The contract burned up and the wish was granted. Rosalind immediately stood up.

“Wh-What’s going on?” she asked as if her body was moving against her will.

But she had every right to be surprised. Her body was indeed moving on its own. The wish Silver Slayer had made with the contract was this: “Rosalind C. Bathory drains Ulaula’s blood and turns her into a vampire.”

“Chelsea, over here.” Hibiki loaned the injured Chelsea her shoulder and moved her away from Ulaula.

“Damn it! What’s going on?!”

“Gyaaah!”

The screams of the vampire and the demon overlapped.

There was a reason Rosalind had called Ulaula a lesser demon. Rosalind herself was far stronger. She caught Ulaula and dragged her to the ground in the blink of an eye.

“Stop it! Stop!” she shouted.

But Rosalind made no reply. Driven by the demonic contract, she opened her mouth wide and dug her fangs into the brown skin of the neck beneath her.

“Aaah! Aaaah! Aaaaah!” Ulaula’s screaming reverberated all throughout the cavern as her blood was being drained.

“Why... Why are you making Rosalind suck her blood?”

“Only a demon can make a demonic contract,” I answered.

That’s right. I’d done my homework. All I’d had to do was ask Satsuki and Chelsea a few simple questions about the rules of the demonic contract. And it was that simple.

“A vampire who sucks someone’s blood can turn them into a vampire.”

That meant that once Rosalind drained her blood, Ulaula would cease to be a demon.

“Aaah... ahhh...”

Fangs grew in Ulaula’s mouth and she passed out from the loss of blood.

Now when she woke up, she wouldn't have a claim on anyone's soul. Everyone who'd been turned into a vampire had been saved. Silver Slayer was no longer a tool of her master. And with the philosopher's stone, Chelsea could cure her brother.

There was just one thing left to take care of.

"...So what do you intend to do now?" Rosalind asked, standing up from Ulaula's unconscious body.

"I'm going to stop you, of course," I said.

"Hmph," she scoffed. "How? You damaged my wolf, but drinking that blood restored me."

"I'm sure it did, yeah."

The plan was for Iris and Lea to help me, but they'd both passed out. Harissa was healing them, but I didn't know if they'd wake up soon. And Silver Slayer was just a human now. She was too weak to fight.

"There's five of us, but you're probably stronger."

Really, it was just me, Satsuki, Harissa, and Hibiki. Harissa had healed Chelsea, but she was still groggy. I couldn't risk having her do anything. Even so...

"I'm going to fight until the end. I'm going to make you happy no matter what."

"You? Make me happy? Hahahahaha! You're the one who told me that I could never be happy, even if I had you!"

She laughed. She was laughing at herself. She was denying herself. It was an awful, heartbreaking laugh. It was the sound of someone plunging into a deep, dark abyss.

"Stop calling me Namidare."

So I had to grab her and pull her back up.

"Stop confusing me with my ancestor. If you called him by his last name, call me by my first."

"I don't want to hear that from you!"

"Stop thinking of us as the same person! I'm me! Look at me! I'm not my ancestor, the man you loved!"

"...!"

"I won't tell you to forget your past or act like it never happened, but happiness doesn't come from the past! No matter how much love you felt, it's just a memory now!" I yelled. "If you want to be happy, you need to look forward. Happiness only comes from the future. As long as you're trapped in the past, it's true you'll

never be happy. But…”

I raised the tiny silver knife to eye level and pointed it at her.

“If you insist on letting what you lost in the past rule you… then come on. Give me all you’ve got. I’ll stop you!”

That was my job. To end Rosalind’s story.

“But if I win, I’m going to teach you… Once your happiness is gone, there’s nothing you can do to force it back. But as long as you move forward and don’t give up, you can start over as many times as you want!”

And with those words, the final battle began.

There was an exasperated silence in the room. There was nothing left for either of us to say.

Would Rosalind defeat us and end everything? Or would we stop Rosalind and begin everything? Those were the only two possible outcomes now.

“Namidare!” Rosalind shouted, charging straight for me.

“Guardian Winds!” Satsuki shouted in turn, summoning her wind shield.

Satsuki’s magic didn’t stop Rosalind, but it slowed her down for a moment. It gave me time to jump to the side.

“Ealim Nekram!”

And that was long enough for Harissa to use her invisibility magic again.

“Tch!” Rosalind sneered. She’d lost sight of us thanks to Harissa.

Hibiki and I took our silver knives and made a move on Rosalind. We slashed out at her from both sides, but our blades cut through thin air.

“Skree skree skree!”

Rosalind had used her vampire powers and disappeared into a swarm of summoned bats. There were easily thousands of them, enough to fill the room in an instant. I couldn’t see anything!

Even if I was invisible, I couldn’t dodge the huge black horde of bats. There were just too many. I used one arm to shield my face as I swung the knife with the other. I managed to take out two or three by chance.

“Kyah!”

I heard Harissa scream. The bats then suspiciously disappeared.

“Harissa!”

“There’s the first one.” Rosalind kicked the fallen Harissa.

Did she turn into bats to find us while we were invisible?!

“Hnnngh...”

I heard a soft moan from Harissa. She was alive.

“Hmph. I just aimed where I assumed she would be. I guess I was a little off,” Rosalind said, ready to deliver the final blow this time.

I made a mad dash for her, but I was too far away.

“Harissa!”

Satsuki was the closest to her and leaped in to save her, but...

“Ha! You’re too slow!”

Rosalind was behind her in the blink of an eye.

“Kyaaah!”

Rosalind’s punch pierced through her wind shield, and both Satsuki and Harissa were blown back into the cavern wall.

“Satsuki!” I shouted.

She groaned as her body slid down the wall and collapsed onto the floor. She’d made a cushion of wind to protect herself, but it seemed like it wasn’t enough.

Two of us had been taken out just like that, but we weren’t out of the fight yet!

“Rosalind!”

I ran at her with my knife, but she waited until the last second to dodge as if she was mocking me. I’d made a fatal mistake.

“...You, I won’t kill.”

“Gwrah!”

She knocked me off my feet with a sweep of her leg, then kicked away my silver knife, depriving me of my weapon.

“Rekka!” Chelsea shouted.

Chelsea, who still wasn’t in any condition to fight, bravely flung her silver knife at Rosalind from where she was lying. But it was a weak throw and didn’t even come anywhere near Rosalind. The knife simply hit the ground hilt-first and skidded.

Rosalind was displeased. She raised her left arm and pointed it at Chelsea.

“No,” I gasped. I felt a cold chill as I watched Rosalind’s hand transform once again into a wolf. “Chelsea, run!”

But the barely-recovered Chelsea was still dizzy. She couldn’t get away in time.

“Chelsea!” Hibiki jumped in front of her, silver knife at the ready.

But Rosalind had seen her coming.

"Fly," Rosalind commanded in a low voice.

The wolf familiar launched from her elbow like a black and red cannonball, dodging the silver blade and tackling Hibiki at waist level.

"Gwah!"

Hibiki was knocked backwards, slamming into Chelsea. Now I was the only one left.

"Damn it!" I couldn't help shouting.

I rolled over and leaped to my feet. Then I ran. I wanted a weapon. I was just three steps away from the knife that Rosalind had kicked out of my hands. Two steps! One—!

"Checkmate," Rosalind said.

I wasn't going to make it!

Rosalind grabbed me by the shoulder from behind and pushed me down onto my knees. I tried to reach out and grab the knife right in front of me, but before I could, Rosalind forcibly turned me around so that I was kneeling before her. It put me at her height. We were now seeing eye to eye, her red eyes staring into mine.

"You lose, Namidare."

"I told you stop calling me that."

As I spoke, I felt around with my foot to try and find the knife. Thankfully, it was close.

"Stop letting the past rule you."

"You humans only live a century or so. You couldn't understand."

Rosalind strengthened her grip on my shoulder. I screamed as I could feel my bones creak.

"I have been alive since ancient times. I will never be able to spend my life with someone else. You petty humans and your fleeting existences have always sought the secret of my longevity. They came for me, one after another. I had the power to drain their blood and increase my kind, but they were only ever puppets. They did nothing to quell the aching of my heart."

So... So that's why she didn't make any servants even though she lived in that huge mansion all alone?

"Namidare knew that I was a vampire, yet he still smiled at me. Do you have any idea how much that meant to me? Can you imagine how my frozen heart shattered when that woman stole him?!" Tears began to form in the corner of Rosalind's eyes as she

screamed.

It was the first time I'd seen her cry. The long, bitter loneliness that was enough to drive a vampire to tears must have been painful indeed. It was probably true that there was no way someone like me, who might only live a hundred years, could understand it. But...

"But even so... that's still just a memory!"

"How many times must you deny me my past?!"

"I told you, that's not what I want to do! There's nothing wrong with having memories. But you can't live off of them. You can dwell on them all you want, but it's not going to bring him back! He's never going to smile at you again! No matter how many times you try and relive that scene in your mind, it isn't real!"

"What?!"

I let my arm drop to my side and inconspicuously moved it behind my back. This was my last bet. I just had to hope that she hadn't been knocked out...

"Look forward, Rosalind. Look at the person who's right in front of you! Look at the person who's with you right now! I'm the one who's going to smile at you!" I stared straight into Rosalind's red eyes and yelled as hard as I could.

Our pasts aren't supposed to tie us down. They're supposed to build up behind us and push us forward.

"You're allowed to regret your mistakes or cry about what you've lost. Don't deny the past, but don't let it rule you. Hold on to what's precious to you, but look forward! Move on!"

Happiness only comes from the future, and the future only spreads out ahead of us. The only way to reach it is to move forward.

"I'll show you the power of someone who's doing just that."

"Then do it now, before I sink my fangs into your neck."

She brought her face closer. She opened her mouth and I could feel her breath on my neck. But before her fangs could reach me, I made a gun with my fingers behind my back and fired it.

"Bang."

The next thing I knew, my field of vision suddenly shifted downward by a meter or so. It was Chelsea's signature magic trick that she'd shown me on the way over here—the power to reduce someone's height. She'd figured out what my signal meant!

"What?!"

Rosalind was only the height of an elementary school girl, but after shrinking a full meter, I was as small as a kid in daycare. The effect was instant, and Rosalind was clueless as to what had happened.

I already knew where the knife was after finding it with my foot, so I was quickly able to grab it now and make my move on Rosalind. By the time she realized what had happened, I'd wrapped both hands around the hilt of the knife and plunged it into her breast. The silver blade slid straight through her flesh. The edge of the blade just barely reached her heart. It only took a few seconds for the strength to drain from her body.

"Uwah!"

I hadn't expected her to fall towards me, so I hurriedly pulled the blade out before it went in deeper than I had intended. Then I tossed the knife aside and grabbed Rosalind... Or, at least, I tried to. I'd forgotten how much smaller—and weaker—I was. Rather than catching her, it was more like I let her fall on me.

"Owww..."

My head hurt. It must've hit the ground when I tumbled over backwards under Rosalind's weight. I turned to the side and realized her face was incredibly close to mine. I couldn't tell if she'd passed out from the shock. There were tears pouring out from the corners of her closed eyes.

Now I needed to make sure everyone was okay, then get Satsuki and Harissa to heal Rosalind's wounds. I went to get up, but as I did...

"……re." Rosalind's mouth opened softly. "Nami... dare..."

I told you to stop calling me that, I went to say, but before I could...

“…Rekka.”

Interlude: 101 Years Ago

It was pure chance that Rosalind had come to Japan after the flames of war had threatened her homeland in Europe.

A powerful vampire like her didn't need to drain blood to survive. The only reason for her to suck blood was to create servants to help her defeat either those humans who wanted the secret of her longevity and youth, or Silver Slayer who simply wanted to kill her. There was also the inconceivable possibility that she might need to restore her life force after being badly wounded by silver. Yet however impossible it seemed, that had been her fate. And so an injured Rosalind was forced to flee the country.

Running water was no threat to Rosalind. But she didn't like it. In order to get to Japan, she had to travel by ship much farther than she ever had before. She would spend more time than she ever wanted to at sea—on the largest body of moving water in the world—and while she was exhausted, no less.

It's less like I've taken damage and more like I'm just stressed out and tired...

But that didn't mean she needed to drink blood. Fatigue could be cured with rest. However, Japan was the first foreign country Rosalind had ever been to. She'd heard it had a completely unique culture, far different from anywhere in Europe. Just by wandering around the city, she could see a mix of different religions. And unlike in Europe, they didn't oppose each other. Instead, they almost seemed to have fused together somehow.

In Europe, it was mainly the religious who had effective means of fighting monsters like her. But what about here? Who would it be to attack her now? She couldn't even imagine. Essentially, Japan was beyond her comprehension. That's why she wanted to be as prepared to defend herself as possible.

And she found her prey quickly.

Rosalind wore European-style clothing, rare for this country, and had an inhuman beauty about her. A foreign girl like her wandering around alone was sure to attract attention from those

with less than noble motives. Rosalind merely wanted to restore her life force, so when one such man dragged her into an alley, her intention was to kill him rather than make a servant out of him. But either way, she was unexpectedly interrupted.

"Gyah!"

The man she was about to kill suddenly fell forward, his eyes rolling into the back of his head. From behind him, another man appeared.

"That was a close one, wasn't it, little girl?" he said.

Who is this man?

The second man wasn't so much a man as he was a boy. He looked older than Rosalind appeared to be, but he was still quite young. He wore cheap clothes and was holding a long piece of lumber that looked like it had been taken from a construction site.

Did he see me getting dragged into the alley and decide to save me? I didn't need his help... but he does look delicious.

The man who'd attacked her was middle-aged and looked like he'd been spoiled by the pleasures of newfound wealth from some project or another. Rosalind wasn't the type to be picky, but given the choice between some scuzzy old man and a healthy young boy, she much preferred the latter.

"Let's get out of this alley and back on the main street," the boy said. "If you don't have a place to stay, I'll help you find one."

He was oblivious to her murderous designs on him, so he offered his hand to her with a smile.

"Don't you dare touch me," she said as she slapped it away.

"Hmm... I see. All right, that's fine too. Just follow me."

The boy turned his back to Rosalind to lead her out of the alleyway, showing no concern for his own safety.

Idiot.

Humans had come after Rosalind's life so many times that this boy's apparent sense of justice didn't impress her in the slightest.

First, I'll keep him from crying out.

She fixed her eyes on her target and took a step forward, aiming for the boy's throat. There was no hesitation in her movements. But...

"Whoopsies!"

"What?!"

Not only did he dodge her attack without even looking, he grabbed her out of thin air as she leaped in for the kill.

"—?!"

Rosalind was stupefied. All she could do was stare.

I understand dodging, but why grab and hold on to me?!

Had he thought that she'd tripped on the middle-aged man's body and fell forward towards him?

"Hmm... Little girl, could it be that you're not normal?"

Even her best guess had been wrong. Now she had no idea what to think, much less what to say. Then he proceeded to talk about things she didn't understand at all.

"I've got this weird thing called the bloodline of the Namidare," he explained. "I'm used to girls like you who aren't quite normal."

Who is this guy? What *is he?*

He was still holding her in his arms. She'd never been touched so gently by someone.

I don't understand. What... What is this feeling?! Fine, I guess I'll just have to kill him!

The confusion was too much for her to handle, so she decided to cut it off at the source, but...

"So just leave it to me," he said.

Her hand stopped. Her heart pounded. She'd fallen in love. She'd fallen in love with his dazzling smile.

"I don't know what it is that you're caught up in, but don't worry. No matter how deep your darkness is, I'll save you from it."

"..."

It wasn't that she'd never seen a human smile before, but no one had ever smiled at *her* like that. No one had ever been that kind to her. Her whole body tensed up like she'd been shot through the heart.

"W-Would you put me down?" It was all she could say.

"Oh, sorry." He smiled and set her down on the ground.

It then became clear how much taller he was. Rosalind could feel him looking down at the top of her head, and her heart began to beat faster.

"N... Namidare?"

"Right. Wait, you haven't told me your name yet."

"R-Rosalind."

"Rosalind, huh? I figured it would be foreign, but that's a cute name."

"...!"

His words only made her feel more embarrassed. She had no

idea where these feelings were coming from.

"All right, let's go someplace quiet where you can tell me your story."

The boy kept talking, but Rosalind was at a loss. And so for now...

"D-Don't call me 'little girl.' Despite how I may look, I'm older than you."

...was all she could manage.

"Wait, seriously? You really don't look like it..."

"Sh-Shut up!"

"Hmm... Okay, got it."

He thought for a moment and looked like he'd come up with some kind of clever trick to play. Then the boy named Namidare offered Rosalind his hand once more.

"Give me the honor of taking your hand, princess."

"?!"

This was definitely his way of getting back at her for slapping his hand away earlier, but she didn't have the mental capacity left to think about that. And she definitely didn't have the mental capacity left to tell him she wanted to hear him say her name again, so from that moment until the day they said goodbye, he always called her "princess."

"Come on, hurry."

"..."

Timidly, she took his hand. That was all that it took to make him smile again.

"I wonder what kind of story yours is, princess!"

"..."

He hadn't yet fully explained the bloodline of the Namidare, so half of what he said was lost on Rosalind.

But his hand was so warm...

And she could feel the kindness in his gaze...

And when she saw the way he smiled at her...

For the first time in her life, she wanted someone by her side.

Epilogue

It was June, some time after we'd come back from the cave, when I went to visit Rosalind's mansion again. I rang the bell at the front door of the huge house, but I didn't have to wait long before I was greeted by a silver-haired maid.

"Sir Namidare, we've been waiting for you."

"..."

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No," I said.

I couldn't tell her that I was trembling in awe at the sight of her. Not to her face. Especially not to someone I knew.

"Silver Slayer... Wait, I guess you're Suzuran now, right? Have you gotten used to being a maid?"

"Yes, thank you for asking." The silver-haired maid a.k.a Silver Slayer a.k.a Suzuran bowed as she answered.

She'd gone from being a homunculus to being human, but she still had no paperwork and no place to stay. Harissa was still living with me, so I wasn't sure what to do about it myself... but surprisingly, it was Rosalind who had volunteered to take her in. She'd scoffed and said something to the effect of, "Hmph. Well, we have known each other a long time."

And so now Silver Slayer was taking care of Rosalind as her maid. It gave her a place to live, but there was one other thing she wanted. It was to be rid of her homunculus name, "Silver Slayer the Vampire Hunter," and gain a new name as a human. So we all came together to pick a new one for her.

"...Are you sure Suzuran was the right name for you, though?" I asked as I walked down the hallway behind her.

She turned to me and tilted her head to the side. "I'm sorry?"

"I mean, it's a really simple name."

Suzuran was the Japanese name of the flower she'd been staring at in the waiting area, lily of the valley. When we were deciding on a name, I'd remembered it and gotten out an encyclopedia to figure out what it was called. I added it to the list

of candidates, but I didn't think she'd actually pick it...

"I am very fond of the name that you gave me."

But her gentle answer dissolved my worries.

"It's the name that you, the person who granted my wish, tried your hardest to come up with. When I whisper the word 'Suzuran' within my heart, I feel warm here." She held both hands up to her chest. "Just like the flower that shares my name, I want to meet lots of other people so we can all experience that warmth from now on."

"I see. I guess it was a silly question." I chuckled and scratched my head.

Suzuran looked at me and laughed softly.

We talked a little more as we headed for the third floor. We arrived just in time to see the door to Rosalind's room fly open and a tiny girl pop out.

“Wh-What are you doing? It was just a little vase!” the young, dark-skinned girl wearing a maid outfit shouted.

It was Ulaula.

“Do you know how many you’ve broken today?! Do it again and I’ll send the wolves after you!” Rosalind yelled back.

Ulaula appeared to shudder in terror and turned to get away from the room as quickly as possible. Only then did she notice us approaching.

“Oh, it’s that human I hate so much!”

“If you’re blaming anybody, it should be yourself,” I said, but she wasn’t listening.

“You’ll regret the day you showed yourself to me! I don’t need a contract. I’ll kill you right now...”

“GET BACK TO WORK!” Rosalind roared from inside her room.

“Aaah!” Ulaula screamed and fled down the hallway.

“...Even as a vampire, she hasn’t really changed much, huh?”

“She was originally a demon, so not even turning her into a vampire seems to have affected her mind.”

Maybe demons had a different kind of mind than humans and animals? Rosalind was still clearly in control though, and she’d said she wasn’t going to let Ulaula drain anybody’s blood. And, well, if Rosalind said it, I could believe it.

“Sir Namidare, my mistress awaits.” Suzuran bowed slightly in front of the open door and ushered me inside.

“Roger that. I’ll just pray she’s not in a bad mood,” I said as I went inside. Suzuran softly closed the door behind me.

“...Hmph. So you came, Rekka?” Rosalind languidly sat up on the bed where she was resting.

“Hey, how’re you doing?”

“...Tired.”

She was wrapped up in blankets and her eyelids were swollen. All she’d done since we get got back was cry.

She’d woken up shortly after we’d returned to her mansion from abroad. Once awake, she finally accepted that she couldn’t get the past back and that my ancestor would never smile at her again... Then the tears started. Even after she’d calmed down long enough to decide what to do with Suzuran and Ulaula, she would still break down and sob for most of the day. The next thing I knew,

she'd missed two weeks of school.

But the truth was that the rest of us had been out of school without permission for a week while we were off looking for the pot too. Rosalind had started skipping classes around the same time, but she was the only one who hadn't come back to school yet. Speculation and nasty rumors abounded, plenty of which involved me. The teachers had repeatedly asked to talk with me about it, and I was honestly getting pretty tired of it.

"Listen... you think you're about ready to come back to school?"

The reason I was here today, in fact, was because my homeroom teacher had told me to visit Rosalind.

"No. I can't let anyone see me like this."

Hmm... Well, that I could kind of understand.

"Oh, that's right. The pool's opening soon. Our school does it a little earlier than the others, I guess, and they're putting the water in early next week."

"Flowing water isn't a weakness of mine, but that doesn't mean I like it!"

What...? Swimming class was the most popular class in the whole country this time of year. I never imagined anyone would get upset over it.

"...Well, anyway. You're the one who used your charm to create all that fake paperwork and get them to accept your transfer, right? If you don't start coming to school, they're going to start calling you Rosalind the Truant, and I don't think you want that."

"..."

Still nothing. She just looked away. Okay, I figured it was time to try my last resort and tell her what I really thought. If that didn't work, I would just go home.

"I want you to go to school, though."

With that, she gave me a little glance.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"It's got to be boring sitting in the house all day, right?"

She laughed.

"Rosalind, you've... you've had a rough time, so I want you to be really happy now."

"...Does that mean that you're going to make me happy?" She turned to me, looking up at me needily.

Come on now...

"Listen... weren't you supposed to stop treating me like I'm my

ancestor?”

“That’s not what I meant!” She leaped out from under the covers and crawled towards me... but then realized how desperate she looked and quickly pulled the covers around herself again. “That’s... not what I meant, Rekka.”

She sounded really hurt, and I realized that I’d made a mistake.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Indeed. As long as you understand...”

There was a moment of silence between us. And finally...

“You win. Starting tomorrow, I’ll go to school.”

“Really?”

That would make me happy. Her too. But she put a condition on it.

“Just for tomorrow... will you walk to school with me?”

“Sure, but... why?”

I didn’t really mean anything by asking, but Rosalind pulled the covers all the way over her head.

In a barely audible voice, she whispered, “D-Don’t make me say it...”

▽

It was Sunday, just one day before the pool opened. We’d gone to the airport to say goodbye to Chelsea.

“Bye, guys. Thanks for everything, really.”

“Don’t sweat it. Right, Hibiki?”

“Yeah,” Hibiki said, nodding.

“You guys really aren’t treating this like the big deal it is. Does helping people come as naturally to you as breathing or something?” Chelsea joked, laughing a little. Then she looked to the side. “And thank you too, Satsuki. Without you, I never would’ve been able to figure out how to make that elixir from the philosopher’s stone so quickly. And Iris, your spaceship helped a ton too.”

“Don’t worry about that either. It seems like I caused a lot of problems for you too, so we’re even,” Satsuki said.

“That’s right. I didn’t come to my senses until the middle of the climax, and then I got knocked out. The only thing I really could do to help was play taxi,” Iris added.

“I-I was totally useless,” Harissa said, a little disappointed.

“No, that’s not true!”

“You were great!”

“You did just fine!”

Satsuki, Iris, and Chelsea surrounded Harissa and tried to make her feel better. She was just the kind of girl that nobody liked to see sad, like some cute little animal. As they fawned over her, we heard the announcement that it was time for Chelsea’s plane to board.

“Okay, it’s time to say goodbye.” Chelsea grabbed her luggage and came back over to me and Hibiki. “I’ll say it again. Thank you. From the bottom of my heart. Without your help, my little brother wouldn’t have made it.”

She then wrapped her arms around both of us in a big hug… And kissed me on the cheek!

“Huh? What?!”

I recoiled in shock. Hibiki looked dead frozen with a similar expression on her face, so I was guessing Chelsea had probably done the same thing to her.

“Aaah!” Hibiki and the other girls screamed.

Were they all shocked by the unusual way Chelsea said goodbye?

“Bye, you two. I’m going to keep wandering around the world, but just call me if you need me. You can bet I’ll be there.”

That was the last thing she said as she picked up her luggage and headed for the gate. Her little brother was waiting for her and waved. He bowed once to us, and then the two of them disappeared into the crowd.

Chelsea was probably going to keep traveling the world as a treasure hunter, but she’d told me what her first stop was going to be. She and her brother were heading home for the first time since they left all those years ago. She was going to face her past and once more start walking towards her own tomorrow.

▽

And so we’d said a pleasant goodbye and ended the story on a happy note. Or so I thought. About an hour later on our way home on the train…

“Hey, Rekka! What was that kiss about? What happened with you and that girl while I wasn’t around?”

“D-Dat’s right! I-I wanna know too, durn it!”

I was getting the third degree from Iris and Harissa. Satsuki, however, hadn't said a word. She was just silently sitting across from me and staring. Of course, they were talking about the kiss Chelsea had given me before she'd left. I was getting all kinds of questions about it.

“Well, what’s the story?” Iris asked.

“What happened?” Harissa chimed in.

Satsuki was still silent.

Only Hibiki had gone through the same thing I did, so she was sitting in the next row of seats and ignoring us.

But come on! You could at least stick up for me...

“I told you, it didn’t really mean anything...”

I started to explain that it was just how people in foreign countries said goodbye, but...

“Aww... And I was going to have my first kiss with Rekka at the amusement park three weeks ago!” Iris declared.

The bomb was dropped.

“What?!” the other girls shouted.

They were all just as surprised as I was... Wait, why was Hibiki reacting like that too?

Iris had only told me she wanted to go to the amusement park! Why was she thinking about something like that?! She should only be doing that with a boy she really liked... Wait.

“What are you saying, Iris? Were you trying to get to him before me?!” Satsuki, who had so far been silent, was the first one to yell.

I’d told her that I would go to the amusement park with her too. Of course she’d get mad to find out Iris had some weird plan...

“Don’t you even start! You were hoping things would get romantic after a fun afternoon at the park too, weren’t you?”

“...”

...Satsuki? Why are you getting so quiet again?

But that wasn’t all. Harissa spoke up too.

“W-Weren’t you supposed to go clothes shopping with me that Sunday?!”

Yes, I was. There went the next bomb.

“What did you say?!” Satsuki and Iris clamored in the same breath, stopping their argument to shoot daggers my way.

Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap! This was seriously scary! And I had the seat farthest from the aisle, so there was nowhere to run. I was trapped. Satsuki, Iris, and Harissa closed in on me and began to question me, but then Hibiki piped up too.

“I see. So that’s why you invited me to the amusement park.”

Another bomb.

A poor boy like me couldn't survive having three bombs dropped on him! There'd be nothing left of me!

No, Hibiki was probably just saying that because she finally realized there'd been a misunderstanding when we talked on the phone that day, but even if she didn't mean anything by it, it only made things worse for me!

"Rekka..."

"Oh, Rekka..."

"Sir Rekka..."

See? Did you hear that?! Those voices that sound like they're coming up from the pits of hell?!

"Would you look at that... They're fighting over you again. Gee, who could've seen that coming?"

R, shaddup!

"W-Wait! Let's just forget about the past, and focus on the fut__"

They didn't even give me the chance to finish my sentence. Palms, fists, and a staff were raised in unison.

And as I listened to the pleasant sound of them slapping my face over and over, I realized... you can make up for your failures in the past, but you can't pretend they never happened.

Now—gwah! Um, guys... Ouch! Cut it out! Ack, please! Gaaah!

—Fin—

Afterword

This is the fourth volume of the romantic comedy that continues to push the genre to its absolute limits. Hello again to the readers returning from volume 3. And hello for the first time to those of you who bought all four volumes at once.

At last, the number of heroines has made it into the double digits. It happened just as the number of wives (figures) on my desk has reached the double digits too. This is the fate of an HJ Bunko author! Well, it's not really fate. It's just my hobby.

Oh, speaking of figures, I went to Wonder Festival for the first time recently. Wonder Festival, for those of you who don't know, is basically the figure version of the Comic Market. They let you put up your own figures on display, and man, it was amazing. It was so much fun. There were even cosplayers. I happened to see someone cosplaying the infamous "Nameko App," and I got to take a picture with them. Whoever you were in the Nameko cosplay, I was the one who said, "My job is actually deeply involved with Nameko..."

And now, acknowledgments and thanks.

A big thank you to Nao Watanuki who drew the character designs for the three new heroines, the items, and the street clothes for the established characters. I love the pose Rekka makes on the cover.

And also to my editor, Nanbu, who I am consistently causing problems for. In the afterword for the last volume, I know I promised that I would get volume 4 done on time, but... sorry. That was a lie.

Also, thank you to Koji Hasegawa, currently doing the manga version for Comic Dangan. I know it's gotta be harder now that it's running biweekly, but thank you for doing such high-quality work every chapter.

And lastly, thank you to everyone at Hobby Japan who works so hard, especially in the editing and sales departments. Thank you to the designers. Thank you to the bookstores who put this book on their shelves. And more than anything, thank you to the readers

who picked up this book. I'm always grateful to you. I hope you'll continue reading.

I'm Nao Watanuki, the insert illustrator. Once again I'm here with my terrible handwriting.

Thank you for purchasing this book. Volume 4 introduces Ulaula. She's the tiniest villain we've had so far, but I hope I've drawn her to look just as evil as the rest.

There's lots of pictures of the new heroines in this volume, but I was happy to get the chance to put in a tiny drawing of my favorite character: Chelsea's little brother. But sadly, nobody got to see Satsuki in a maid outfit... Please accept this chibi drawing instead.

Check out Koji Hasegawa's webcomic of Too Many Girls too! Messiah looks so cool! And the heroines are all cute! It's high-quality and worth reading even if you've already read the novels. Search for it on the Comic Dangan site.

Thank you to Nameko, and the editors as well. Holidays or not, two months was such a short time...! I'm relieved that I just barely made the deadline, and I look forward to seeing you guys again in the next volume.

Nao Watanuki

挿絵担当・和狸ナオと申します。

今回も1頁、乱文乱筆にてお邪魔致します。

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I Saved Too Many Girls and Caused the Apocalypse: Volume 4
by Namekojirushi

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